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ABSTRACT

Articles in this publication address the writing process, teaching writing, and research on the teaching of writing, and take the form of personal experience or opinion, or explore the work of others who have contributed to the field. Articles in first issue in this volume include: "The Now of School" (Rochelle Ramay); "Revising Revision: How My Students Transformed Writers' Workshop" (Jan Matsuoka); "A Love of Words: An Interview with Patrice Vecchione" (Roger Bunch); and "Beyond Blank Books and Laptops" (Julia Tucker-Lloyd). Articles in the second issue include: "The Writing Projects and School Reform: A Local Perspective" (Marcie Wolfe); "Syntax at an Early Age: A Mother Challenges the Experts" (Natalie Kramer); "My Perspective: A Response to Syntax at an Early Age" (Melanie Sperling); "Ghetto Ease" (Michael Jackson); "The Parallel Universes of Theory and Practice: One Teacher's Journey" (Beverly Paesano); "Creating Civility: Dialogue Journals in Special Ed Classes" (Elizabeth Anderson); and "In the Midst of Silence" (Kimberly Sloan). Articles the third issue include: "Happy Problems" (Kim Stafford); "Writing from the Feather Circle: Seeking a 'Language of That Different Yield'" (G. Lynn Nelson); "Virtual Reality: Evaluating Online Information" (Holly Littlefield); "Do You Remember Me? Writing Oral Histories with Nursing Home Residents" (Cathie English); and "Teacherless Talk: Impressions from Electronic Literary Conversations" (Elaine Ware and Karen Murar). Articles in the fourth issue of this volume include: "Courage and Voice: The Story of a Young Author and Her Teacher" (Jane H. Talbert); "Strange Students in a Strange Land: An Excerpt from 'A Poem for Every Student'" (Sheryl Lain); "Mi Voz Suena Asi (My Voice Sounds Like This)" (Cathy Carmichael); "Diving with Whales: Five Reasons for Practitioners To Write for Publication" (Grace Hall McEntee); and "Let's Take Another Look at the Fish: The Writing Process as Discovery" (Bob Tierney). (RS)

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The Quarterly
OF THE NATIONAL WRITING PROJECT

Winter 1998 Volume 20, Number 1

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The Quarterly
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Winter 1998 Volume 20, Number 1

The Now of School

by

ROCHELLE RAMAY

◆

2000 is the magic number, the first year of the 21st century, the century when we finally get serious about education. Educational change is in the millennial air and my school district, like most others, has signed on with a number of redesign and reform efforts. One reason I know the district is serious is that, as a department chair and mentor teacher, I am the recipient of reams of paper related to changing the system: copies of reports, statistical abstracts, reform proposals and other documents that have originated in bureaucratic offices and think tanks hundreds or thousands of miles from the small rural town of Corning, California where I teach.

A common theme running through many of these documents is the need to prepare students for the 20th century workplace. The U.S Department of Labor's SCAN Report for America 200 (1992), a document curriculum leaders in my district take very seriously, supports this need. Here are a few of its imperatives:

> *All American high school students must develop a new set of competencies and foundation skills if they are to enjoy a productive, full, and satisfying life.*
>
> *The qualities of high performance that today characterize our most competitive companies must become the standard for the vast majority of our companies, large and small, local and global.*
>
> *The nation's schools must be transformed into high-performance organizations in their own right.*

The report urges that students graduate with "workplace know-how," which consists of the following five "competencies":

1. *Resources: Identifies, organizes, plans, and allocates resources;*
2. *Interpersonal: Works with others;*
3. *Information: Acquires and uses information;*
4. *Systems: Understands complex interrelationships;*
5. *Technology: Works with a variety of technologies.*

From the Editors

In this quarter's "Connections: Research and Practice" column, we are pleased to feature two articles based on classroom research studies conducted by members of Teacher Researchers for Educational Equity (TREE), a statewide teacher research project of the California Writing Project. For two years, a group of more than fifty teachers conducted individual research projects in their own classrooms and schools, meeting as a group three times a year to discuss issues of equity and diversity and to support each other in their ongoing research.

The first of these articles, Rochelle Ramay's "The Now of School," confronts the idea that education needs to be a preparation for "real life." In an effort to help her high school students come face-to-face with their futures, she is forced to rethink the purpose of school.

In the second article, "Revising Revision: How My Students Transformed Writers' Workshop," Jan Matsuoka asks her students for opinions on her Writers' Workshop and get some surprising and ultimately helpful answers.

Both articles illustrate that when teachers look closely at their own classrooms, they challenge their assumptions and stretch their vision.

Additionally, the report lists a "three-part foundation of skills and personal qualities that are needed for solid job performance." These include basic skills, thinking skills and personal qualities.

So who's to argue? These lists sound like accurate, if vague, descriptions of the skills necessary for success in the world beyond high school. But how would we know when and if our students have achieved these competencies? It was time to do what the district had been urging us to do: rethink our competency tests.

Although I'd scored hundreds of them, I'd remained consciously oblivious to my school's English language arts competency exam until two years ago. The test presented the simplest of tasks that nearly every freshman passed the first semester of high school. For instance, students were asked to correctly address an envelope and to describe a process, like how to make a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. And, because students were able to retake the test as often as necessary, not passing and ultimately not graduating was never an issue.

Now, however, I wanted to lead my department in rethinking the design of the school's competency test. I vowed that we would write a competency test that authentically allowed students to demonstrate their preparation in English language arts for life beyond high school, a test that would give them a chance to show that they were ready to meet the world's challenges.

As I began thinking about the test, I was led to question all sorts of issues. What does someone need to know when he or she graduates from high school? Where might English language arts fit, and how should students demonstrate whatever it is they need to know? My questions led me right back to my classroom. What should be covered in classes that I teach?

I turned to my students for help with some answers. In particular, I decided to work with a heterogeneous group of juniors in the American literature portion of an interdisciplinary studies curriculum. The class was composed of twenty-one students, nearly half of whom spoke, read and wrote Spanish and English fluently. They were on the verge of graduation, making decisions and dreaming of futures merely four semesters away. I was wondering how the "workplace know how" advocated in the SCAN report could be made real for this group of students, representative of a diversity authors of publications such as the Scan Report habitually gloss over.

Here's a look a year later at some of the individuals in my class, all of whom, like it or not, will soon find themselves in the workplace of the 21st century:

> *Danica:* No one ever notices when she is absent from school. A quiet girl, Barbara's best friend, but few others know her. She rides the nearly two-hour bus ride to school, lives with her grandmother. Her mom lives in Fresno and "I miss seeing her, but I can't go back until she gets her life together."
>
> Danica welcomes everyone, demonstrates kindness, a shy smile, and an invisible existence. She

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lives a difficult life, separated by many barriers her peers can never see: poverty, isolation, displacement.

Carl: "I started shaving in seventh grade. Everyone thought I was a lot older than I was." I met Carl when he was a freshman in my lowest English class. He talked too much, but with his great sense of humor, I couldn't help but like him. When he became a sophomore, we lost touch. I heard he'd left school, got in some kind of trouble, and then wanted to return for his junior year. "What happened to you that year?" I asked him one day after school.

"Well, I started stealing stuff from some houses and then some stores. Mostly money and stuff I could sell. My cousin bought most of it."

"Were you into drugs?

"No, I just wanted to buy stuff, ya know, like video games." But Carl pulled himself out of his pattern the last time he was in The Hall. "I was in the same place as twelve-year-olds who had tried to kill people. I knew I didn't belong in there, so I turned myself around."

Carl left high school three weeks before graduation.

Alma: "I thought out of all the kids in our class, I'd be the one who wouldn't graduate." She smiled. She knew I knew she would be walking across the stage in June. Tough girl who'd spent a year on home study because she didn't get along with other kids. Living with her boyfriend since her sophomore year. Not pregnant. Aggressive. Angry. And graduating.

Nathan: A dark character always dressed in black. A percussionist constantly drumming rhythms only he understands. Nathan has enlisted in the Marines. I haven't made the connection yet, but he has. He wants the toughest they have to offer, the most demanding and demoralizing. Nathan comes from a home that is rough, but he's not proud of it.

Alex: Hispanic male who looks Anglo; tie dye, Grateful Dead, Army boots, hackey sack, skater.

Connections: Research & Practice

Alex speaks softly, made puppets to demonstrate the sinking of the *Titanic*. His artistic talent and sense of justice make him popular and powerful. He got in a tangle with the vice principal and nearly lost his chance to stay on this campus. He worked out the problem. "Maybe the Army," he says. Where did that come from?

Allen: All league, all section in football, baseball, basketball, track and field. Traveled to the state track meet after qualifying in two events as a junior. Great student. Great kid. Allen will be attending a major private university on an athletic scholarship. He works hard at everything. He never rests. How will he do in an urban setting, three hours from his small home town?

Barbara: Eighteen and raising a two-year-old. Already her future is unlike anyone else's. She has to get a baby-sitter so she can go to the Friday night football game. She's determined to graduate, "For my son. I want to be a police officer." So she joins the junior force. But Barbara gets distracted and nearly fails American government and may not graduate. "Barbara, what happened?" I ask her. Her life got complicated, she says, but now she's back on track and doing her homework, reading about the branches of government and caring for her child.

Armando: Armando had to move to independent study at the end of last year. His girlfriend, a freshman, delivered a baby and Armando needed to work. But he got tired of her, quit being around, abandoned school, but resumed this year with a new attitude. Weekly he showed me his art work. I commented and suggested. After a long weekend, his current girlfriend, a freshman who is in one of my classes, returned to school with black eyes and a broken nose. "I got in a fight and my dad is going to press charges on the girl who did it." She thinks

she's pregnant. After a lot of emotion and investigation, the girl admits Armando hit her. He's eighteen, could be sent to jail. She won't press charges. I see them walking hand in hand on campus.

Moving a group of students as diverse as these to a proscribed set of "workplace competencies" would be no easy task.

Karen: "So Karen, what's up for you next year?" I knew there would be no problem with her graduating. "I'm going to Butte (community college) and become an RN."

"How are your grades? What about your science class?"

"I'm not taking any science this year. And I think my grades are good."

"Aren't you supposed to take a lot of science?"

"I don't know. Besides, I don't like it very much. When I get to Butte I'll take it. I want to be a nurse so much that I know I can get through anything. I love helping people."

Jesus: What a kid! Smart, creative, articulate, explosive and opinionated. On All Soul's Day he gave a powerful presentation to the class about Mexican tradition with marigolds. He asked dynamic questions, focused his group's projects, and landed in the midst of a classroom stand-off with Armando. Jesus had plans. "Mrs. Ramay, I'm gonna work so hard this year. My grades are good. I want to go to UC San Diego and study Spanish. Try to become a teacher." Jesus could do it too.

He danced for the school's Ballet Folklorico group. This same boy, I heard later, had bought a gun. He lived with Veronica, his girlfriend, and earned As in almost every class.

Now, Jesus is in San Diego, but his future isn't what he'd planned. Not even close. He dropped out of high school, moved, fathered children there and here, joined a gang. One day he came back for a quick visit. He wore a beeper and his eyes darted around as we talked. Actually, I asked the questions. He was waiting for a friend to meet him.

Moving a group of students as diverse as these to a proscribed set of "workplace competencies" would be no easy task. Discussing the issue, Allen had a bright idea: "If we want to know these things, then we need to find out what it's like outside of school from those people who graduated. We could interview some of them, or something." The other twenty students nodded in agreement. We began mapping out a temporary plan for the year. Our inquiry focused on job shadowing. Students would follow someone who holds a specific job in which the student is interested, debrief as a group, find common threads, and draw conclusions for instruction in English language arts. Pretty straight forward and doable in the context of school.

In October of 1996 and January and March of 1997, I took my juniors on some vocational visits. The purpose of these visits was to ask questions, make notes, and come to an understanding about what the world outside of high school would expect from them as workers. We came up with a core question that the students would ask each worker they encountered, "How do you use reading and writing in your work?" Each student maintained a research notebook.

Their first trip was to a county-wide job fair focusing on local career opportunities. Emergency medical technicians, military recruiters, and small business owners gave talks and presentations. My students arrived with a list of questions to ask presenters. At the end of the day we filed onto the bus heading back to campus. The students chatted about the inside of the ambulance, criticized a student from another school who had asked the speaker an inappropriate question and bragged about the free gadgets they'd picked up; magnets, insulated cups, pencils, and the like. It was a start. I felt good.

As we debriefed the next day, they shared some of their answers to the questions they'd asked. "I asked the man from Wal-Mart what he had to know

when he got out of high school to do his job, and he said he wasn't sure. What do I write in my notebook about that?"

"Yeah, I asked what kind of writing had to be done in the Army, and the recruiter couldn't explain."

"What was with that karate guy at the end?" Nathan wondered about the motivational speaker who had shared stories about his own life; kicking a drug habit then starting his own karate studio.

Now what? Students were only beginning this process, but as these representative responses suggest, it seemed time to move the students to a little deeper level of insight. So I talked about the kinds of observations and conversations I'd had as a model of ways for them to think about gathering information. For instance, when I talked with the emergency medical technicians, it was clear to me that they loved and were dedicated to their work. My students, who had been so focused on the role of literacy in the workplace, missed this entirely. The students nodded and listed other kinds of questions for the next trip, such as, "What attracted you to this particular line of work?" and "Would you recommend to your own children that they pursue your profession?"

In preparation for our next visit, as I wanted students to observe their subjects as well as interview them, I took the class through a simple observational activity. Students sat in pairs with their desks facing each other. For five minutes, one person tried to assemble a tangram while the other person observed. The assembler was directed to talk throughout the time to articulate his or her process. The "researcher" watched facial expressions, body language, and the process by which the partner solved the problem, and listened to the assembler's tone of voice, word choices, and explanations without venturing an opinion. The sole purpose of the exercise was to gather data which could later be analyzed. Once the five minutes expired, the roles were reversed.

The class loved this activity. They shared all sorts of details: the girl who puffed her cheeks as she worked, the boy who began breathing heavily as the time limit approached, the student who made jokes to detract from his inability to solve the puzzle. Then they drew conclusions from their observations. Even well after the study ended, the class talked about this process. I had hoped their enthusiasm for this activity would have some carryover when, the next day, we headed first to our region's community college and then located in the same area. At the community college, the students observed mostly "vocational classes," watching and interviewing reentry students and first timers. They spoke to instructors and looked at curricular materials. Each student traveled with a partner so that when we debriefed at school, they would be able to compare their findings.

In the afternoon, we toured the hospital. Doctors led the students through the facility from intensive care to the boiler room. The students observed premature infants and cardiac surgeons. The hospital was so quiet that almost none of the students spoke aloud to the doctors. Occasionally they asked about a machine or a patient, but mostly they were silent. On the trip home, they told shocking medical stories which were mostly unrelated to what they had observed. Some said they felt uncomfortable in intensive care knowing many of the patients might die, while others claimed to be fascinated by this facility saying they couldn't stop staring.

"I asked one of the nurses to show me the kind of stuff she does, and she had tons of colored folders. She told me she spends most of her time writing in them. That sounded fun to me..."

One of the tour interns was from the small mountain town of Yreka, located about 3 hours north of Corning. Yreka and Corning play football against each other, so the students had heard of the small town. The doctor talked about attending a local community college, transferring to UC Davis, then USC. I couldn't have planned a better situation: a person from a town similar in size as the one where my students live, follows a college path that students in Corning might access, then chooses to return to contribute to the community that supported him in his youth.

The next day students recounted what they'd observed. From all three visits, the job fair, the com-

munity and the hospital, we constructed a chart divided into several sections: observations, conclusions, common findings, recommendations for further study, and application for the competency.

Just because we hear what is good for us, will we recognize the importance of listening to experience, or do we need to make our own discoveries?

At the community college, one student said he'd noticed the differing ages of vocational students compared to traditional college students and commented on a huge tattoo on one of them. Another saw that the environment was "nice."

"What kinds of reading and writing was happening in the classes you observed?"

Danica smiled shyly, "I forgot to ask about that. The lady we talked to told us about how hard it was to have a kid and go to college too."

"Anyone else?"

"The teacher gave me one of the handouts he gave the rest of his students. It's about some kind of seminar on horticulture." Jesus had visited the agriculture department.

"It sounds like you had some trouble getting information. What happened?"

Karen said, "Let's talk about the hospital. Maybe that will be easier. There was a lot more to see there."

"Not really," Alma reported "I wanted to see more in the nursery. They only had one baby in there and it didn't look very sick. I wonder why it was in there anyway."

"Did anyone speak with the doctor from Yreka?"

"No." The class laughed at Yreka's "lousy" football team.

"Remember that big fight after the basketball playoffs up there?" Allen shook his head trying to gain his composure.

"I think the hospital was the most interesting." This is Joany. "All the people were really nice to us. I bet it would be a good place to work. The cafeteria sure was cheery."

"What did you observe there that gives you this impression?"

"Well," Joany looked through her notebook for clues, "I asked one of the nurses to show me the kind of stuff she does, and she had tons of colored folders. She told me she spends most of her time writing in them. That sounded fun to me. I like organizing things. I want to be in the medical field when I get out of school, and I'm glad I got to see what goes into the files."

"So Joany, what conclusion might you draw from this observation?"

"You need to be organized and have good handwriting."

Now it seemed like we were finally getting somewhere. "Nathan, what did you observe?"

"The maintenance man got paged all the time. He was so polite about it, too. I would have been so mad at people interrupting me. So write down for observation, 'interrupted,' and for conclusion write, 'need to be flexible.' I guess you need to know how to talk on the phone too, about all sorts of things."

The remainder of the debriefing followed similarly. One by one the students shared what they'd observed and drew a conclusion. Later on we would begin to consider additional questions and ultimately consider the impact of these findings for the new competency.

Our last inquiry visit was to Chico, about 25 miles away, where students actually "job-shadowed" a person whose job matched their own interests. With the help of the vocations counselor, I spent nearly two full school days orchestrating this day. She and I each spoke with dozens of business people who were willing and excited to have students spend a morning with them. We organized times, contact persons, and agendas. With support from my district, we hired a

substitute to drive students to their individual locations, then pick them up once the morning ended.

Each student had his or her own person for the morning. Students were supposed to ask questions, watch the job in progress, read materials the professional was expected to read, and read writing the professional wrote for his or her job. I accompanied a pair of students to the studio of an artist who had created a mural for a parking structure in Chico. The artist was completely open to describing his work and showing us the process he'd followed for the mural's completion. I asked most of the questions.

Returning to the classroom, students once again shared one by one what they thought about this visit. A few liked the person they followed, others didn't have much to say. Some kids shared from their journals, told what they'd seen, others spoke without notes.

"When you write, you need to somehow put yourself into it."

"All jobs demand some kind of technical reading."

"You need to be flexible."

"You have to know how to get the information that's important to you by asking the right questions."

These responses and sharings of their observations surprised me. How insightful. How right on. Aren't they smart? Even the guidance counselor who observed this debriefing nodded and smiled. As I had been saying all along, these kids are good!

I felt myself gloating and smiling. Now all I had to do was write the competency.

Summer vacation began and I was proud of the way I had nudged my students to look seriously at their futures. When I spoke with teachers and friends, they validated how terrific my study was.

I began a serious look at a redesigned competency for English language arts, rereading student notebooks, studying the debriefing chart, and just plain thinking about ways attributes of success outside of high school might be demonstrated at school.

But something didn't feel right. It felt empty and fake. I couldn't quite catch my discomfort. It seemed that if kids could discover what they needed after high school and it matched what adults said, then we'd found the cure. We all agreed. So if both sides were saying the same things, what was the problem?

That fall, on the first day of school, I had an experience that led me to understand my discomfort. Barbara, the young mother, ran into my room. "Did you hear about Danica? She's pregnant. She's ruining her life!"

"Didn't you warn her?" I asked.

"I told her all the time. She didn't listen. No one ever listens about what can happen." Barbara then listed the names of a number of girls who were pregnant, some of them who knew how difficult Barbara's life is.

That afternoon I shared Barbara's story with my car pool colleague. "This proves we can't teach kids not to get pregnant. If they can't learn it from their friends, we sure can't teach them. Maybe because it isn't real to them."

Had these visits been mere assignments?

That night I couldn't sleep. Barbara's story. Danica's pregnancy. What was happening?

Talking to Barbara and my teaching friend forced me to rethink the discussions my class held about writing skills in the workplace. I replayed and relooked at everything: visits to the hospital and community college, job shadow debriefings, conversations with the artist. It all began coming together. Danica hadn't listened to Barbara or asked her any questions because there was no way Danica could relate to Barbara's situation. Danica could not project herself into Barbara's future. And the more I thought about this, the more sense I found in the ways my class had approached these questions about the future.

I was filled with questions. Just because we hear what is good for us, will we recognize the importance of listening to experience, or do we need to make our

own discoveries? Does knowing the possibilities and demands of the future necessarily lead us to prepare for that future? What can school do for students' futures? Where does a competency test fit in? Barbara and Dancia had led me back to square one.

I understood now that during my students' research and my observations of their processes, none of the information made much sense to them. How did the questions they asked, the answers they heard, and the observations they made come together? Had these visits been mere assignments? They thought the people they shadowed were polite and friendly, or the job was interesting or dull. How could these experiences possibly have anything to do with them? The kids never mentioned possible implications of their research for themselves or school, but most especially they never spoke of what any of this research had to do with their own futures.

The kids never mentioned possible implications of their research for themselves or school, but most especially they never spoke of what any of this research had to do with their own futures.

I recalled how bored they seemed with the presenters and the format of the job fair. They seemed restless during the debriefing, staring or waiting silently for their turns to report. And although we were charting various experiences, they seemed disoriented with their talks, somewhat confused about what they were supposed to say.

I had been so impressed by the words my students had reported that I had not consciously observed them. During debriefings, these students never talked to each other about what they'd observed; no conversations away from my direct influence. What I had labeled as discussions was in fact only students reporting what they'd observed. The classroom had been quiet during our debriefings. As one spoke, the others sat quietly waiting their turns. I should have noticed that this "look at the future" was fake and the kids knew it.

And the most telling of the missing pieces? When something exciting and interesting is happening anywhere on a school campus, other classrooms, the playing field, the staff room, students and teachers constantly talk about it and the whole campus knows. But no one outside of our class had heard about what we were attempting to do. No one.

Showing kids what they need to know when they graduate from high school is naive. It's like taking math and knowing that we have to do well this year so we can be ready for next year, instead of learning this year's information for its own sake. Math sticks when it's real, when it is connected to a real person's real life. When we learned the multiplication tables, we had no idea what they meant or represented. It took our own lives to make the real meanings for them. Even now, they mean different things to different people. And for some they are completely meaningless. My students knew before I did that these visits were contrived exercises.

When athletes practice, at what point does the practice become more than just drills? I asked my teaching partner who shared these students with me, the varsity girls' volleyball coach, "When do you think your starters really begin connecting practice time with actual game play?"

"About the last quarter of their senior season." And yet these girls have been playing volleyball since elementary school. "They somehow don't trust that the game will be anything like the practice. I guess they know it's mostly drills, and games aren't at all like practice. But when they become seniors, practice starts making sense to them."

Now what? Is school fake? Contrived? Artificial? Certainly sometimes. But it is also a place where magical moments occur. We've all witnessed the light turn on. But the truth is, we just don't know what school does for each and every individual. And individuals make school. We also know that school is a separate reality; it isn't home or work. It is its own place.

Working with so many students, a teacher never knows when she helps make school real. I asked mydaughter, a University of California freshman, "Who was your favorite teacher?" Although she had many fine teachers who encouraged and inspired her, she told me it was her first-grade teacher because "she didn't treat me like I was little." Could her teacher have ever predicted this kind of influence?

continued on page 35

Revising Revision:
How My Students Transformed Writers' Workshop

by

JAN MATSUOKA

The revision of writing is bittersweet, pleasure coupled with pain. Eric, my fourth-grade student in a 3/4-grade combination class at Joaquin Miller Elementary School in Oakland, California described this condition well when he wrote the following:

> *When the teacher said we had to do a revision to publish a story I said 'Aw man' moaning in my head, but after my revision I said it sounds better and then I did more revisions to make the story better.*

For another student, Emilene, however, the process was pure agony:

> *I don't like revision one bit even though it helps. I don't like it because it takes too long and I can never think of a better story. I actually hate to revise.*

Yet despite feelings such as Emilene's, revision is a requirement in my class if a child wants to publish a piece of writing. Over time, many students pick up on what needs to be done between first and second draft writing:

> *I think that's the difference between my first and second drafts was that in the middle of the story I put more details in like what type of dog I had and what color. Jojo is a blondish brown collie and has sad brown eyes. You know more what he looks like.*
> Lena

> *Whenever I rite something during Writers' Workshop, I always take my writing home, and I read it over and over to myself. I even read it again to my mom, my grandma, and my dog. In my story* My Grandma is the Next Michael Jordan *I noticed that I used the words 'then' and 'said' too much so I took out the 'thens' and rote something esle besides 'said' like 'screamed', 'announced', and 'whistpered'.*
> Mareesha

> *In my story* The House of the Dreaded Unknown *I put an arcade in the first draft because I liked that one espicialy. In the second draft I put chess in there instead because at the time I just beat my dad in chess. I loved that the whole ending depended on the guy winning the chess game, Otherwise he was doamed. I feel sort of weird about revision because you can think about one thing and do another.*
> Sean

But getting students to this point has not been easy. Revision is a difficult, but inevitably a necessary part of the writing process. A writer refining a piece of writing to uncover its essence is like a jeweler buffing a diamond to expose the luster within. Yet many students do not see it that way. They approach their work with such feelings of ownership, so sure that it is perfect the first time around, that they resist making any changes. Even after participating in countless minilessons on revision, watching others model revision, and conferencing with other students and me about an early draft of a piece, some students still recopy the original story over again, word for word.

For the teacher too, because of some students' resistance to change, revision is a difficult skill to teach. Even after over thirty years of teaching, on days when revision is the focus, I often need to go home after school and take a nap before dinner, sometimes never waking up until the next day. Nonetheless the results that spring from successful revision are worth the struggle. Listen to Mellisa's ebullience:

> *I feel great that I revised it because now I have a great story. I feel like a real published author. I feel like Melissa A. Rowen, author from the outside world!*

But we are hearing from Melissa at the end of the process. Along the way many students resist revision, and when they are willing to revise, they have no idea where to start. Because I find so much value in revision, I am continually working to make the process easier and clearer. Thus, when I joined a teacher research group at UC Berkeley, I was naturally drawn to the question: What revision strategies help students improve their writing during writers' workshop? In this article, I want to highlight those strategies that proved successful as I collected data for two years, working first with my fourth-grade class and most recently, with a 3/4-grade combination class.

Defining Revision

In my research, revision has a two-pronged definition. The most common definition of revision is improving the first draft of writing and producing a final draft by subtracting, adding, or replacing words, phrases, sentences or paragraphs. Using this definition, however, the amount and nature of the revision will vary from student to student according to the ability and/or the interest of the writer. My third graders and even fourth graders with poor motor coordination make revisions directly on a first draft; if I were to ask these students to rewrite each paper, they would be overwhelmed by the task, and they would might even learn to dread writing. Most of my fourth graders, however, can write two drafts. But in any classroom, there are exceptions. One overachiever, a bright third grader and a second language learner named Alejandra, ended up with five drafts of her story, "The Dracula Puppy Who Loved Candy Instead of Blood," each draft quite different from the previous one. Passing her desk during Writers' Workshop, I rarely saw her face, only the top of her head, as she labored, pencil in hand, writing one page after another. As we conferenced, she noted parts she loved in different drafts, and later on, cut and pasted them onto her final draft.

The second definition of revision involves a larger vision: the improvement of writing from one final draft to another, a growth over time. That's the kind of revision I was hoping to trigger as I conferenced with Sandee, a second-language student. I saw that her story, "My Trip to LA," was little more than list of events which had taken place over two weeks, all described on one page. I shared all the parts of her story I had enjoyed: the way she showed her excitement by reporting her inability to sleep the night before the trip, the certain types of cars her family had counted in order to kill the boredom of travel. As we talked about her goals for her writing in the future, she told me that she needed to be more careful about her capitals, using them at the beginning of sentences and with names.

I, however, was interested in more than cosmetic changes. I told her I wanted her to have more focus in any story she wrote. She gave me her "worried-Sandee look." I could tell she was puzzled, so I made rough sketches representing events of her trip to LA, drawing chuckles from her — she never knew how poorly I drew. Making a small frame out of another piece of paper, I placed it down on one of the drawings, a sketch attempting to show Sandy as she visited her grandmother. Focus, I told her, means I want her to only tell me all the details about this memorable meeting with her grandmother and not all the other things she did on this trip. "Oh, I get it," she smiled, "like just one cartoon, not a whole bunch." There were several pieces in between before she finally wrote a masterpiece focused on a snake her family found in the backyard and the way they finally got rid of this dreadful creature, reporting in the process her Mien family's superstitions about snakes. She received an enthusiastic ovation as she shared this story in author's chair. I trace triumph on this occasion back to our discussion of how "My Trip to LA" could be revised.

Revision in the Context of Writers' Workshop

I have adapted the work of Donald Graves and Nancie Atwell to create my own version of Writers' Workshop. The mini-lesson is a featured part of this process. I give these lessons at the very beginning of the writing hour. They are lessons dealing with all aspects of writing. I might read aloud from a picture book to generate ideas for talk about "places in the room to go

when you want to read your writing to someone," or present a lesson on how to use quotation marks when writing dialogue. I make certain that these lessons are no more than ten minutes long. I know its time to stop when I get clear clues that students are itching to write: they are toying with their pencils, rustling papers, wiggling in their chairs. Many students leap to their writing once the lesson is over.

Lessons on revision are an important part of my mini-lesson plan. In these lessons I often effectively use transparencies or copies of first and second draft writing of former students. Students note the writer's strengths and needs for improvement in the first draft, and the next day, observe what the author did to revise in the second. They can see strategies used successfully and sometimes unsuccessfully. At times, they see that the writer's first draft is better than the second. Mareesha shares her thoughts on mini-lessons in an interview:

> *I personally like mini-lessons because it is interesting to know how someone else might have written. Then I think to myself, 'Wow, I could use that idea in my own writing!' It really gets my mind going and also my thinking and adds to my writing. I might even trash a sentence or two and replace it with something else.*

At the beginning of the school year, one of the more successful mini-lessons was on leads with examples of different ways an author might start the same story. I asked the students to choose a recent piece of writing and to compose another beginning. Jake made this revision:

> First draft: *About two years ago we bought a house in Northstar at tahoe. We go up there every chance we get. It's a big house. It's got a loft on top in case you don't know what a loft is its something I can't explain.*
>
> Second draft: *Two years ago my mom brought up about getting another house. "But where?" we all said. Then my dad said, "I know a place. Where? we all exclaimed. At Lake Tahoe. It's a beautiful place. OOOOHHH, yaaaah we said. And we jumped around, hugging each other. So we went and looked at lots of houses.*

Interviewing Jake about the differences between these two leads, he said: "After your mini-lesson, I tried writing the second beginning. I like the second one because it's more interesting. It shows our excitement over getting a house at Tahoe. And we were really excited, you know. Hey yeah, it has more showing than the first one. The first one is just a boring, like booo-ring. I don't know if anyone would read my story if they read the first one."

Mini-lessons that involve my students are certainly my most successful. Often I ask students to take out a recent piece of work and make revisions right on their paper: between the lines, in the margins. I require my students to skip lines when they write during writers' workshop to facilitate these kinds of changes. I might even request two changes. Because their writing is freshly done, they have a vested inter-

est in a mini-lesson as they practice the new skill, revising on the spot. I collected the following sentences after several lessons on sentence expansion, the italicized verb phrases added during the lessons:

"He jumps on my mom's lap, *meowing for her to pet him.*"
Jesus

"Then he left, *debating if he would like the job.*"
Eugenia

"We screamed and screamed and screamed, *trying to get away.*" Lucy

The two cats lay in front of the fireplace, *licking their paws.*" Jake

Mini-lessons Revised

With results such as these, I thought everything was going great until two months into school when I asked my students to rank which writer's workshop activities they found most helpful. Mini-lessons received the lowest score. I was shocked — no, devastated. How could that be? I spent so much time and thought preparing for these lessons! I have a couple of students who are especially reflective about writing, so as I had lunch with them, I showed them the survey and asked them why they thought mini-lessons rated so poorly. Here are portions of that conversation:

J: Not to hurt your feelings, Mrs. M., but we do like your mini-lessons, but when I'm writing a story, I want to get to my story. I am only thinking about what I am going to write. Umm. Sorry, but sometimes I don't hear you. (Everyone laughs).

Me: Really, that's okay; don't apologize.

C: Yeah, no offense, but I kinda get ideas to make my story more exciting outside of school. Like I might see a TV program and think what a great ending and kinda of go from there.

J: Umm. He's right. You don't stop thinking of writing when school stops because you're always thinking of how you can make it better so that the kids in class would love it.

Me: So are you both saying that once you become a writer, you are even thinking about writing outside of school. You become observant about what you see, hear, ah, read?

C: Like me, like I really am serious about my writing. If I write I want something really great. I don't think everyone in our class is serious, if you know what I mean. Don't get me wrong, I'm not trying to put the other kids down. Ah, most of us like writing a lot.

Me: No, no, I don't see your comment as put-downs. You're just being honest. That's why I am interviewing you two.

J: Yeah, I want to be a writer someday. But when I was writing about my younger brother being a brat, umm, I kinda looked at him at home to see how I could improve how I wrote about him being stupid about looking at Power Rangers and karate stuff on TV and stuff. Mrs. M., you can't give a mini-lesson on that. (Laughs.)

I learned a great deal from this fascinating conversation. Becoming a real writer, a child looks not only to the classroom, but to the richness of the world. After that mini- lessons became less frequent. I spent more time conferencing with individual students and instructing small groups. But of course, I did not give up altogether. Before one mini-lesson focusing on a different kinds of genre, I blurted out something about how tired I was of giving these lessons. Wouldn't it be wonderful, I said, if one of the students gave a lesson instead! Spontaneously, Ludvig, a student from Sweden whose second language is English, raised his hand and said, "I'll give one now, Mrs. M." He raced to the front of the class and said:

Today I am going to talk about the word 'said.' When your father is mad at you, you don't use the word 'said' when you write about what he said. You use words like,' yelled' or 'screamed.' They go better with him being mad. And when you tell someone, 'I love you', you don't say, 'I said.' (Class giggles). Umm, you use 'whispered' or 'moaned.' (Class howls.) Are there any questions? Now I want you to look at your writing that you did and change one 'said' to a more exciting word.

Ludvig bowed as he received a standing ovation.

What a precious moment Ludvig gave us. The children combed their papers and struck out the many "saids," replacing them with powerful verbs. We had a wonderful time as students shared their changes. True, I had given this lesson on "said" before, but this was a voice other than mine, it was a fresh challenge from a peer.

Right after this lesson, Kaneesha ran up to me and whispered, showing me her paper and pointing to a sentence, "Mrs. M., I use the word 'said,' but I use it like this: '"I am so tired," he said with his head hanging down.' Sometimes, isn't it okay to use it like this?"

"Of course! You're absolutely right!" Excited, I asked, "Do you want to give the next mini-lesson? Let's meet and talk about your lesson!" And so the idea of student mini-lessons caught on. Students signed up for times to be coached and to present to the class, some of the students even in pairs. The list of student topics looked like the following:

Jamal: "How to Write a Longer Story"
Dana: "Getting Ideas Right from the Classroom for Stories"
Matt: "Handwriting"
Katelyn: "Draw First, Then Write"
Jason and Evan: "Writing a Story with Someone"
Emma: "How I Check on My Spelling"

I realized that the format of my mini-lessons became a model around which the students framed theirs, even down to those revisions on the spot. But most importantly, I noticed how attentive the students in the audience were to the mini-lessons given by their peers, the variety of voices enabling them to look at their work anew. Once reluctant to revise at my direction, students were now being pushed by their peers to make changes.

The Teacher-Student Conference

One spur to revision that has proven successful year after year is the conference my student teacher and I have with individual students, each of us averaging three conferences per day. We focus on student work in process or on final drafts. I don't know who to credit for this form below because it wasn't one that I created, but nonetheless, I have found it invaluable in keeping a record of our conferences.

Teacher's Conference Record for _____		
Title/Date	Skills Used Correctly	Skills Taught

I have this form stapled to the right side of a writing folder with current work as a reminder of the goals a student has set for his or her writing. During these conferences, especially by the end of the first semester, we want to see the writer articulate the strengths and weaknesses of each piece. By becoming more reflective about the craft, a writer begins to internalize those skills that will allow revision throughout the writing process.

On the next page I show the form I used with Michael. We see that after Michael's first publication, "The Bloody Eve," he began to use dialogue with success and became quite adept at writing with Show Not Tell (descriptive writing). In the second conference, Michael could point out the strengths of his writing although I had to help him with areas that needed attention. Although Michael is a good writer, he is easily distracted, becoming more social with time. And thus, I needed to have more than one conference with him on The Kidnapper to keep him on track toward a final draft. When we directed him to use the computer, he was able to finally revise and publish this piece. It should be noted, however, that the form does not show the many times parent volunteers and I checked in with him, keeping him accountable for his time and work— what we call "putting on the pressure."

Author's Chair

Author's chair gives students a chance to read completed first and second drafts to the class. The writer receives positive comments and may solicit questions. Some students are eager to read in author's chair; others must be strongly encouraged if not exactly bribed. By circulating around listening to writing read aloud and also by investigating writing folders after school, I find many examples of superb writing that need to be shared with the whole class. I want these presented as models, but I also, of course, want to hear from students who are struggling. The purpose of author's chair is both to show off accomplishment and to get help with revision. When students are not getting useful and appropriate comments from their response groups, author's chair provides a chance for a second opinion.

This use of author's chair evolved from a conversation I had when Rene one day approached me, livid that he wasn't receiving helpful response on his writing from his peers. "How could I revise when I get dumb responses like these here?" he scowled, tossing the response sheets my way. The suggestions for improving his piece were: "Rene, you need to spell better." "You need to have more Show Not Tell." "Tell what was your mother's boyfriend's name." I told him that I agreed one hundred percent that these comments were not helpful; they were either unspecific and unconnected to the content of the piece or too specific. To appease and support Rene, I decided, right then, to put him in author's chair. Rene then shared this writing:

First Draft :

one weekend I was learning how the bikeride. My mom's boyfriend was tecting me how to ride my Bike But I know how to ride my bike safter a wihl and I feel of my Bike and I hert my knie. It is fun to ride. I like ride my Bike at jaquin milar park and at my gradma's house and at Mrarit Collige and to Skyline Make and one more place is roberts park I like to ride my Bike at Yosemite to. I can go Blasing than a speeding boolit on my Bike at Yoseite.

His classmates proceeded to tell what they liked about the story, what he did well. Lastly, they asked questions and suggested improvements he could make, all of which I copied down:

Tell what her boyfriend's name is.
When did you fall?
You need Show Not Tell.
How badly did it hurt when you fell?
What did they say when they're teaching you to ride the bike?
How old were you?
What does your bike look like?
How did you feel when you're riding your bike?
How many days did it take to learn?

I had Rene think overnight about what he wanted to do with all this feedback. With the permission of Rene and his responders, I then showed an overhead transparency of this list of responses with Rene again on author's chair. I reminded everyone that as the author, it was totally Rene's decision as to which questions and suggestions he wanted to address in his second draft. Realizing he had such power, he now seemed to sit taller, basking in the attention. He then responded to the responders: "I don't think it is important what my bike looks like although it was blue. Umm, I don't remember exactly what my mom and her boyfriend said or when this all happened. I will try to do the show-not-tell; that isn't hard. I have to think about the rest." Equipped with the contributions of his peers, Rene then wrote:

I'm Learning How to Ride My Bike

One weekend I was learning how to ride my bike. My mom's boyfriend steve was teaching me how to ride my bike. But I know how to ride my bike a wihl. But I fell off of my bike and hret my knie reely bad. My niey hite so bad I felt like crying. My bike is blue. It is fun to ride. I like riding my bike at Joaquin Miller Park and at my gradmas house and at marit college and at rabers park and yseite. I can go faster than a speeding

Figure 1: Conference Record for Michael

Title and Date	Skills Used Correctly	Skills Taught (1-2)
The Bloody Eye 10/1/96	1. Character's thoughts "How could he miss dinner?" 2. Tight story — good beginning, middle, and end	1. How did you feel? Show-not-tell Dialogue
Adven. of Mohawk Man & Super Cat 11/6/96	1. Good dialogue 2. SNT — "so strong that ..." "stung so hard that ..."	1. Capitalize names 2. Other words besides "then"
The Kidnapper 1/15/97	1. Strong verbs — "threw," "plunged" 2. Other words besides "then" 3. SNT — "So scared..." "screamed so loud ..."	1. Capitalize names 2. New lead besides "Hi! My name is ..."
The Kidnapper 1/23/97	1. Verbs 2. Sense of humor shows through 3. Some names capitalized 4. New lead	1. Periods at end of sentences 2. More details in one scene

boolit on my bike. When I ride my bike I feel like I can ride my I bike all my life.

From that day on, the author's chair took on a new complexion as more and more students, like Rene, requested input from the whole class. Before they took the chair for this purpose, however, I required that they receive at least two peer responses. Seated there, they would ask specific questions about a work in progress: "What should I do with my writing now?" "What title should I give my story?" "How should I end this story?" "Where should I put show-not-tell?" "Do I have too much dialogue?"

In a reflective piece, Narami, a fourth grader, expressed well the value of bringing an unfinished work to the author's chair:

> *It helped to be on author's chair because other people have more ideas than one person. The class had better ideas.*

Thus, author's chair eventually became a richer pool from which students could draw ideas for change in their writing.

But my encounter with Rene lay bare another revision-related writers' workshop problem. Rene was getting "dumb responses" from some other students. This should not come as a surprise to most experienced teachers. We have noticed that the quality of response varies greatly from one student to another. How then are we to prevent the student who depends on response from others from feeling short changed?

I came on a partial answer to this question when I read an article by Donald Graves in *Instructor Magazine* entitled "Experts in Writing." Graves suggests that there are students who have expertise in different aspects of writing in any classroom community. I was interested in this notion, as I thought it might help with the problem of inexpert response that plagued many students working on a revision. If each student had an expertise, then others could go to that person for assistance in a specific skill.

We began by generating a list of such proficiencies, using only about half:

show-not-tell
using complete sentences
words besides "said"
similes
metaphors
using quotes in dialogue
other words besides 'then'
using quotation marks
feelings of a character
letter writing form
vivid verbs
possessives
setting a scene
dialogue
spelling
transition words
sensory details

poetry
capitalization
character building
leads
paragraphing
great endings
catchy titles
humor

One day I announced that I would be interviewing students to see if they qualified to be experts. I focused on only two proficiencies that morning. They were to sign up for conferences throughout the week and bring writing samples that proved they knew a particular skill. A buzz spread around the classroom, even a "Yes!" here and there, giving me clues that they were excited about this opportunity to prove their worth; quickly students began pouring over their work, making corrections and additions. Revision was happening before my very eyes!

Sections like "show-not-tell" and "words besides 'said'" quickly filled up, and with time, the experts then began interviewing their peers, freeing me to work with students in other areas. The experts were much more stringent about qualifying their peers than I would ever have been. When one interviewee was reduced to tears, we had to have an emergency meeting of experts to talk about being supportive while still testing. They learned a new word that day: "tact!"

What then were the results of such a venture? The more competitive and competent students tried to qualify for as many areas as possible so they also became risk-takers in their writing, plunging into areas like "thoughts and feelings of the character," "setting," and "character building," around which they previously tiptoed. Ironically, proofreading and revision became natural by-products as students read and reread and rewrote portions of their papers to perform well.

Becoming an expert was also a booster for those quieter students like Leona and Jesse who were superb spellers. They were very much in demand when students needed to edit their papers for publishing. They helped each student generate a list of words that students misspelled often.

We depended less on parent volunteers for editing purposes as the students went to each other for help. Talk about building a classroom community!

To keep the experts from backsliding and falling into bad habits, I periodically asked for evidence that they were maintaining their skills. I put stars by their names on the "expert list" when they passed — more stars proved you were "too-good-to-be-true."

As a way of showcasing writing which other students might admire and use as models in revision, we put together a flashy bulletin board titled "The Writing Hall of Fame"...

I met with the more reluctant students, offering them another pair of eyes with which to comb their papers to see areas where they were strong. Sean, almost afraid of his own shadow, was thrilled to see that he always got possessives correct, a skill mastered by very few students. Sandee, like several of my second-language students, used "said" and other mundane verbs too often. With instruction from her best friend Katy, she began using the thesaurus and experimenting with word choices. Two weeks before the end of school, she became an expert in the category of "words besides said."

Because students were motivated to qualify as experts, they were more attentive when I gave my mini-lessons. They now had ears to hear and the courage to try new strategies in writing. I had to chuckle when I saw Melissa even taking notes as I spoke.

There was, however, a down side to this generally successful technique. By definition the term "expert" is exclusive. Benjamin tried again and again to qualify for "catchy titles" but he just did not seem to have the catchy title gene, producing titles like "My Cute Dog" and "My Trip to San Diego." We looked at book titles and tables of contents to see if he could understand the gist of interesting titles. We brainstormed words he could add to "My Dog" to make it more exciting. Sadly, he didn't seem to understand. I tried to find other areas of expertise without much success. I still feel badly whenever I greet him in halls this year.

Writing Hall of Fame

As a way of showcasing writing which other students might admire and use as models for revision, we put

together a flashy bulletin board titled "The Writing Hall of Fame" which was made up of snippets from such writing:

From Angela's "Home Alone": *He ran down the stairs and hopped on the couch and curled into a ball because he was so scared."*

Dennis from "The Abduction": *It was really weird. There were different lights from green to red to purple. It looked like Christmas. All they needed was a tree.*

Erica from "The Haunted House": *The porch steps creaked when I stepped on them. The door screeched when I pushed it. I felt something brushing the side of my head.*

Jesus from "Meow, Meow": *What's weird about them (my cats) is Tippy meows like a lion and purrs like the pitter patter of a mouse's run. Mittens meows like a mouse and purrs like a volcano ready to erupt."*

Somehow, like some teacher-generated plans, the idea was easier to conceive than to carry out. Soon the board looked pathetically sparse. Before killing this project, I decided to ask three students, choosing those who were competent writers and already in the Hall of Fame, to form a committee responsible for finding treasured morsels of student writing for our Hall of Fame, whether they heard them during author's chair, while responding to writing or merely through the grapevine. Ashley, one of the committee members, announced that they would be interviewing interested applicants for the Hall of Fame. Within weeks, we started to see students taking care to write with specificity in their pieces, even rewriting, to qualify as a Hall-of-Famer.

Committee members like Jake would occasionally ask my advice:

J: Mrs. M., do you think that Eric's paragraph should qualify for the Hall of Fame?

M: What did he write?

J: He wrote, 'The boy ran as fast as a cheetah across the school yard.' The rest of us on the committee feel that it is a sentence a lot of people write. It is kinda not a new idea.

M: Well, I will go along with the committee's opinion, Jake.

J: Yeah, we got a lot of those kinds of sentences lately: We just tell them go back and change that sentence. 'Try again,' we tell them.

M: Wow. You people are tough!

Soon after this conversation, I noticed Eric revising his cheetah sentence to give it originality or, as the kids say, "make it fresh."

After turning it over to the children, the Writing Hall of Fame generated renewed interest. Some children even gave up their recess to meet with the committee. Before each writing period, one committee member announced the new Hall-of-Famer, who then read his/her qualifying sentence or paragraph. A certificate designed by a child in our class was then awarded to the new member, followed by enthusiastic applause.

Conclusion

I have presented here some specific revision-related strategies that have evolved as I have done my research. It is my hope that teachers will be able to adapt some of these to serve their own classrooms and students. But I believe I learned more from my research than some specific classroom techniques. Reviewing what I have done over the past two years, I am struck by the fact that every time I got in a jam, it was the students who helped me out of it. I learned from them and with their help found better ways to do mini-lessons, author's chair, the Hall of Fame board and more.

As I increasingly involved my students in the teaching of writing, asking them to help me find answers to sticky pedagogical problems, they responded with enthusiasm, generosity, and wisdom. In essence, they taught me as much as I did them — teaching turned full circle.

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Learning with April

by

BOB FECHO

◆

Bob Fecho is a teacher consultant with the Philadelphia Writing Project and edits the PhilWP Update, *the newsletter for the project. This piece is reprinted from their Winter issue. Bob Fecho also teaches English at Simon Gratz High School in Philadelphia.*

She wears a *niqaab*—a full veil—which, for the uninitiated, seems to say, "Keep your distance."

But her eyes reach out from the space between her veil and head covering and say, "Bring me the world."

She often covers her hands with gloves, an odd, almost old-fashioned touch for Western eyes.

Yet, she proudly displays her new Reeboks, gleaming white under her gown.

Her father named her April, but her sisters in Islam call her Hafeesah.

She rises in mid-afternoon to go to the old storage room we have set aside for her prayers.

If I chance upon her in the hall after prayer, she often takes these moments to kid my solemnity or single-mindedness.

As a teacher I have always been committed to preserving my students with the full spectrum of options before them, urging them to seek the most from the world, to see education as a means for pursuing their individual rainbows and challenging the status quo. But equally, I have also always been committed to respecting the beliefs of my students, to allowing them to understand their own needs, to giving them the room to bring who they are into the classroom.

April, my veiled student, is torn between her faith and her curiosity. She thrives on learning like few I have taught, yet that very learning is a threat to the orthodoxy she wishes to maintain. As her teacher, I am torn between my wanting her to consume the banquet of literature before her in great gulps of enthusiasm and my deep-seated belief that her faith is an integral key to her identity.

She is an African American adolescent woman robed in the Islamic religion. I am an Eastern European middle-aged male loosely sweatered in a belief that humans could survive without God if that were to be our fate. She reaches out for her education with her eyes and her voice, both clear despite the veil. I can only reach back with the same.

I thought I knew all the rules, all the moves, all the approaches for reaching students. She has changed the rules.

She wants her education as much as she wants to observe her faith which frowns on too much secular interaction for women.

I want her to experience the world as much as I want her to find a niche in that world which allows her to keep the essence of who she is. So we talk. When we can, we talk. Sometimes we write. But it's always conversation in whatever form. Sometimes in my room. Sometimes in long strides down the hall. We talk. We listen to each other. We know that the answers are in the engagement. We know that the engagement is the answer. We talk.

We have learned to accommodate each other. She lives by the letter of the *Qu'ran*. She feels she cannot appear provocative before men. Presentations in front of the class would put her into a sticky situation. We talk. What does it mean to be provocative? In her eyes, seeking the center of attention would be unwise. Plus we cannot photograph her. Yet, I teach English, and learning to speak before groups is part of English.

So, we make room for difference and find ways for her to present so we both feel satisfied. Once I had her discuss her work during lunch to a female audience and a female colleague. Another time, I left all the women students in class with my student teacher and I escorted the young men to another room. No one squawked. Now, when April's turn to present comes round, the young men in class head for the door without my prompting.

When I asked April to take part in some professional development with the school district and student teachers, we developed discussion groups dependent on interaction of all group members. In this manner, she could contribute as she does in class discussion without feeling that all eyes were on her. She found ways to have her say without dominating.

She has never used her faith to avoid work.

She has only ever tried to find ways for her education and her religion to coexist.

And she accommodates me. In my zeal to expose her to the wonders of the world, I sometimes forget that I cannot—must not— expose her.

Plus, I cannot deny my Western ways. In a recent context vocabulary exercise, I equated polygamy to aberrant thought. She said, "Hmmm." A "hmmm" loaded with portent. So later I pursued and later she revealed. "Do you really think that way?" she asked.

Viewpoint

I admitted that monogamy seemed so ingrained in Western culture that I hadn't thought twice about the extreme negative connection I was making. Her eyes saddened and were downcast. My only barometer. She sighed. We went on.

April is class salutatorian, but she did not go to graduation. Her own choice. It would violate her principles. The ceremony is video taped. Sitting up front with the Honor Society would have put her in a provocative way before men. Delivering her salutatorian speech was out of the question.

I am divided about this decision. But so is she. Yet she remains resolute.

I told her that, either way, I would be sad. "If you miss graduation, I'll be upset that you denied yourself the celebration you deserve, " I said. "But if you go to graduation, I'll be upset knowing you compromised your principles." She nodded, and her eyes listened behind the veil.

She made the choice she can live with. She did not attend.

She leaves soon for Bryn Mawr. She wishes to be a gynecologist. As usual, she opens herself to learning within the frame of her gender and her religion. Robert Frost would call it "running loose in harness." I call it learning with April.

A Love of Words:

An Interview with Patrice Vecchione

by

ROGER BUNCH

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Santa Cruz, California, poet Patrice Vecchione has a well-earned reputation as a gifted poetry teacher. In addition to over twenty years' experience teaching poetry, she is also co-editor of numerous poetry anthologies, most recently In Celebration of the Muse: The 15th anniversary Anthology, *and* Storming Heaven's Gate: An Anthology of Spiritual Writings by Women. *A collection of her poetry,* Territory of Wind, *will be published this spring, and she is working on a book about teaching poetry.*

Why is it important for students to learn to write poetry?

By writing poetry, children prime the pump, free their imaginations. It's a grease job for the mind. A lot of what it's about for me is teaching an awareness of feeling, helping students find their language, name who they are and their experience of the world. Writing poems is of value for anyone—grocery clerk, janitor, bank teller. Everybody has stories that warrant being told and listened to. Not everybody will be a great writer because of interest, time or talent, but we can all experience transformation through language. Poetry takes language below the surface. It's like a dream or prayer.

Writing poetry can also be a key to writing prose. You learn distillation of language, to be concise, the use of imagery, surprise, detail, specificity, poetics—simile, metaphor, personification, alliteration, paying attention to the sounds of words—all of which have application in prose. You pay attention to the particularities, the nuances of language; you can get to your greatest potential in language. I ask students to write whatever comes to mind, to realize they know more than they think they do, to trust their imaginations. This transfers to other forms of writing. Ursula LeGuin says, "Reality is a slippery fish that often can only be caught in a net of spells or with the help of metaphor." Allowing yourself to write what you didn't know you knew, to write and not make sense, to write without planning what you're going to say—those techniques have application in other forms of writing. Poetry can help children care about words and where words can take them, help them recognize the magic in the writing process. As the doors open, they can lean to write about anything.

Through poetry, we can also find out a lot about who our students really are. We don't find out about their humanity and inner life from a math problem. They write things in poems they'd never just tell you. A poem is private and nonlinear; it encourages careful attention, a depth of awareness.

And poetry is important because it can heal emotional wounds. For a child to say something about a loss they hadn't affixed private language to—say a girl's loss of her father—is profound. That experience, which didn't have words before, is mirrored and deepened through language. So her experience isn't invisible inside her, it's also on the page, and you can watch the light enter her face, watch her fear lift.

School, like much of modern life, can be the antithesis of poetry. Teachers have to convey an incredible amount of information, so we stifle children's spirits to get them to conform in class. Some of that's changing with smaller class sizes, but when you have 30 kids your first job is to manage, in this small space, these

little people who have a physical desire to move that exceeds what our day will allow. In a sense we remove poetry from their existence by saying their natural inclinations are not appropriate in school.

Our lives are so complicated. Even children get up in the morning in a hurry to get to school. "Did I remember my lunch? Do I have bus fare?" Children often come to school with great needs, difficult lives. School may be the only place they get consistency, attention. We have to respond to far more than educating their minds. Poetry pays attention to the nuance of experience, the spiritual in life, which our society often ignores. Beaver Cleaver-land wasn't everybody's life by any means, even during the 50s, and life is harder now. Kids are being pushed. I see it a lot. Poetry allows them to clarify and integrate their feelings, their experience, their thoughts.

I think of my own childhood—wanting to say what was true and not having the opportunity. That's one reason I chose to write. I wanted the page to hold my view of my life, of the world. I didn't want to be told, "Don't air the dirty laundry." I didn't want to be told, "Everything's fine, dear," when it wasn't. Being told, "You don't know what you know," was crazy-making. I want children to be able to know what they know and trust that knowing, to acknowledge and trust their own perceptions, and writing poetry is one way to do that. Attaching language to feelings is a way for them to come to grips, to transform, communicate, and understand their feelings.

Can't "airing dirty laundry" bring up things you can't deal with, and create problems with parents ?

When people speak the depths of their truths, they say things they don't anticipate saying. Writing poetry encourages us to speak uncensored. Saying, "You're free to write whatever you want" (which I do, and I think that's essential, because they need permission) runs the risk of children writing things that are inappropriate. And they do. So I'll tell a child, "It might be better not to read this poem to the class." I respect the fact that there are families behind these poems. When work is delicate, it needs to be treated delicately.

But often, in writing that poem, there's an illumination for the child, one that may not have occurred otherwise. Writing poetry can be therapeutic, but it isn't therapy. In the classroom it's not meant to be therapy, it's meant to be writing poetry.

Is all poetry the expression of feelings?

Some poetry deals less with feelings. We need to welcome the whole child—intellect, body and heart, past and present. But I see a connection between deep feelings and inventive language. Being in a feeling, attentive frame of mind helps words and insights come forward, whatever the subject. An alertness, an awareness. It helps the language we choose have more originality, fewer cliches, more layers of meaning. It's different from using language to give directions or convey facts. And, as I said, it seems to meet a need in children.

You have the reputation of being a brilliant teacher of poetry.

I do? [laughs] I've worked hard to be good at this one thing. I don't teach math or science. It's unfortunate that, in our culture, we require a lot of teachers to teach all subjects. To some extent teaching is a skill that's transferable from one discipline to another, but the idea that a third-grade teacher should be an expert at teaching everything is disrespectful to the teacher and all the subjects expected to be taught. For 21 years I've been developing my skills in teaching this one subject.

I love poetry. I love what happens when you put words together you didn't know you would. You sit down, have this sense, put these words side by side, and something happens. You tell a story, create a picture. Donald Hall calls poetry "the unsayable said." I don't like literal, sequential things. I like spontaneous combustion. When I walk into a classroom and say, "I love words," the kids look at me like, "You're a lunatic. You love these marks on paper that don't even hold water?" I like where words take me, that they can take me. With words you can make something happen that's never happened before. Suddenly you have a third thing you didn't anticipate. To me, poetry is magic, which is what the soul is—unchartable, magical.

What sort of relationship do you try to establish with your students?

I try to support their exploration, their imaginations, to be receptive and convey a belief in the students. I want them to know I'm listening with them for what-

ever comes forward to be a poem. I want to meet them in their deepest place, where profound language comes from. To leave disbelief and doubt behind, to invoke the world of emotion and more—human essence, nature, so they can follow what William Stafford calls the "silver thread" of the poem. After you write down a word, you have to be open to the surprise of the next word, and the next. As the teacher, I try to be in a slow, patient place, the midwife to children birthing poems. Sometimes to write poems you have to go into the dark. I'm a companion to the children as they write. I say, "It's okay. It's safe. You'll come out on the other side." At times I find writing terrifying, this blank sheet of paper in front of me. It's hard, but incredibly rewarding. When I was in school I hated writing. I turned off until I had an incredible teacher, Arlene Hawkins at Santa Cruz High, who encouraged me to write poetry, to use writing for myself, to make it a foundation for other writing.

How do you get students to write ?

The individual is at the helm, so most students feel more empowered writing poetry than essays. Poems don't have to adhere to the same rules as other forms of writing, especially when you begin. There's no wrong way to do it except not to do it. Poems can be short. They fit in the palm of your hand. That's one of the allures to kids. I don't say, "This has to be three pages with research and an opening paragraph." Activities that involve more emotion than thought or event are the most successful, particularly at the beginning. They tend to lure students into the writing. Most of us love talking and writing about ourselves. We're experts of our own experience. Writing poetry about what we feel and know—the personal, social, political engages us. From there we can move out into the larger world.

It's also fun to bring in lessons that play with language so children see language doesn't have to be a "boogie-man" full of onus and weight, that language can be clay—you can mold it, tear it, bend it, moosh it. If you're beholden to language you can't write freely, won't find its potential, won't master it. Put words next to each other that aren't commonly put together. I discuss the uses of exaggeration and lying in service of telling a deeper truth. I say, "In poetry you can lie, but you have to lie honestly. That's the trick." As Emily Dickinson says, "Tell all the truth but tell it slant." I tell them there are days I sit down to write and nothing happens. There will be days when their poem is hiding. That's just the way it is. William Stafford says, "If the child could have done better he would have." For the most part, unless a child is asking for attention for some problem, they want to do well, they want to excel. When a child won't write a poem, it's generally not because they're in a hurry to go to recess or want to do math. It's because there are things going on in their lives, that whole other life that doesn't get left at the door.

Writing is challenging. After all, what if I acknowledge to myself what I really think and feel? Then maybe I can't approach my life the way I have been. At some point if you're writing poetry you're going to reveal who you are, your ideas and perceptions.

At Branciforte Elementary School we were writing about our beds, and one boy wouldn't write the poem. I knelt by him, and as he got talking he told me he didn't have a bed. He was ashamed. Slowly, as he began to write, he wrote about where he did sleep, on the floor or, sometimes, in his mom's bed. He read it to the class. The others came toward him, were compassionate with him. Poetry can bring out our compassion. Poetry isn't just writing about the light passing against the fence. Out of that individuality and specificity you bring the whole of yourself. It requires risk. But it's also empowering to carve out an avenue of expression and choose the recipients of that expression.

How do you tap into emotions?

The poems I read them elicit emotion, so I'm saying by example, "This is what I want you to do." Children have less self-doubt, generally speaking, about writing than adults do. Children usually welcome the invitation to write from the heart, to try something new. Their experience of the world is more fluid and imagistic than adult experience, and their language carries emotion so it often comes across as second nature. They haven't been cut off from their heart, language is new, unrestricted by "You should or shouldn't say it that way."

How do you present a poetry lesson ?

Ritual and familiarity help give us something to rely on, so I construct lessons more or less the same. Students need a structure to feel safe during the writing process. I say, "The structure of the workshop is thus," and follow that. They also need to know that what's being asked of them is reasonable. The writing activities change each time, but the structure remains the same.

I usually limit lessons to 45 or 90 minutes. After a brief introduction I read one or two poems, ones connected to the lesson. It's important to me to introduce poets the children might otherwise not become acquainted with, poets from the cultures of the children in the class, or people in their communities—Stephen Meadows who lives in the San Lorenzo Valley, or Adrienne Rich who lives in Santa Cruz. I like to bring Lorca to older children, and discuss the political implications of poetry. Lucille Clifton is a favorite for children. Her poems are vivid and short and go to the heart.

After I read to them I give the writing activity, take questions, remind them of my unusual rules for writing poetry, and we write. Some teachers feel otherwise, but I find talking disruptive, so unless we're writing collaborative poems, this is a quiet time. We write for ten minutes to half an hour depending on the students' focus. When we're done, some read aloud what they've written. This is important. Poetry is a spoken art. I don't think you really own what you've written until you read it aloud, attach breath and voice to the words. I ask students not to clap until everyone's read because it breaks the mood. It's usually not a good idea to have every child read each time. You don't want it

to get boring. When they've heard 16 poems about "what's at the bottom of my heart," they don't care anymore. You want it to stay light and fun, not grueling. Read some now and save others for a time devoted just to reading poems.

Over time, I think it's important to introduce basic poetics, to define simile and metaphor, and explain the role of the line in poetry and have them experiment with it, but on those days the students probably won't write as well. Some will come up with fine metaphors, but they're using their minds to tackle that, not to make whole poems. Concentrating on developing a specific poetic skill breaks the mood of making a poem.

I think we have an obligation to teach revision and editing, but since I work with other teachers' classes, I don't use peer response groups unless the children have been educated substantially on how to respond. Poems often express such tenderness that it's easy to injure the writer. I usually don't make editing or revision suggestions on children's poems until after the third or fourth session. The part of us that makes poems and pictures and music and dance is one of the most primal and soft parts of our personality, the same part that loves. It's easy to thwart creativity. We have to treat it with the utmost care. I hear so many stories from adults who were so harshly criticized as students that they completely shut off their creative selves and still won't go there. We need to treat children with dignity and respect.

What's the difference between teaching poetry to second graders and to high school students?

It's very different. Young children are less set in their ways. Poetry's closer to them. Second graders don't tend to worry, "Oh, what will they think of me?" High schoolers are always thinking about that, which can make it hard to write a poem. Their emotions are changing every few minutes. Another big difference is their preconceptions about what poetry is. High school students who aren't familiar with poetry are often resistant. But I tell them I started writing poetry in high school, and it steadied my life, made order out of chaos. It's the perfect form for them at a time of so much upheaval and change. Poetry can help us gain clarity during times of tumult.

With younger children I'm playful with language, silly. I'll read them "How to Eat a Poem" by Eve Mirriam:

Don't be polite.
Bite in.
Pick it up with your fingers
and lick the juice that
may run down your chin...

I'll ask, "What did you have for breakfast?" They say, "Cereal," "Captain Crunch," and I say, "None of you had poem for breakfast? Go home tonight and ask for poem for dinner." I can exude a kind of enthusiasm, an irreverent abandon with language that's part of the heart of what language is.

You can't do that with high schoolers. You can read them poetry that's much more sophisticated—they have the vocabulary, the intellectual and emotional development to understand Wallace Stevens, Anna Akhmatova or Adrienne Rich.

A lot of poets have material appropriate for young children, though—Neruda's odes for example. There are layers of meaning to poetry. Children can access that. The words are right there behind eyelids, at the back of tongues, in inner ears. The doors to their imaginations are easier to access. When I read poems to children there's usually a place where the key sinks in, the lock clicks, and the door opens. That's a lovely thing about poetry.

The lesson structure I spoke about is identical, no matter what age. With high schoolers who are not willing to read aloud, I'll do the old trick of picking up all the papers and reading some anonymously. Or ask them to read one word from their poem, and the next time two words, then three words. Suddenly the whole class is reading their poems.

You work mostly in other teachers' classes. How does your teaching affect those teachers?

Some teachers aren't comfortable teaching poetry, or don't like poetry, or don't want to be responsible for teaching it. There are other teachers whose confidence with and interest in teaching poetry is growing. Some are bringing poetry into other curriculum areas—science or math.

A lot of teachers write poetry along with their students, so they can have the kinesthetic experience of writing and reading what they've written aloud, and seeing how on-the-spot they can feel.

They also tell me they get to know their students in different ways by watching how they act and how they respond to poetry while I lead the class. They'll say, "I didn't know such-and-such a student was having those problems till you came in and did poetry. I didn't know that event in his life was having that affect on him."

How do you get teachers excited about poetry? What do you try to do when you lead a workshop for teachers?

Some smart, creative teachers are intimidated by poetry writing, or unfamiliar with the form. I want them to be more comfortable. How? We read and write poetry, talk about it. I read them poems written by children. When they hear what children can do with language they often get excited. Then we get writing. Mostly I want to offer them an experience of language coming almost unbidden, that incredible joy of language coming quickly.

You can't teach someone to drive a car unless you've spent some time at the wheel yourself, and I don't think you can teach poetry without having written it. Some things you can teach with a manual and common sense. Poetry isn't one of them.

I ask them to be aware of their internal critic. By the time we're adults, most of us have a pretty developed internal critic that lashes out at what we write. This is destructive. Critique your writing later. We need to be gentle with ourselves when we write.

I ask them not to get discouraged when their students don't write poems that knock their socks off, not to feel they haven't done a good job teaching poetry. The practice of making poems is often a lifelong practice: it takes time to develop. So pursue it and encourage students to pursue it, but don't take it too seriously. Be playful with language. Allow it to be soft under your touch. Allow yourself to be surprised by what comes out of you and your students.

Student Poems

The Puzzle of Life

The puzzle of life is complicated
like an ordinary puzzle but harder.
You always put the pieces
with the flat edges together first,
giving support for my future.

Clifton Riley, age 8
Loma Prieta Independent Home Study Program
Los Gatos

Mis manos
son el retoño
del futuro,
para mañana
mis manos.

My hands
are the sprout
of the future,
for tomorrow
my hands.

Francisco, grade 2
Pajaro Valley Shelter, Watsonville, CA

When joy leaves it leaves you
for a great while.
It goes far, so, so far.
I do not know how far.
It may come back to you
and it may not.
You do not know when joy is
coming
but you know when it is there.

Marisela Chavez, grade 2
Gault School, Santa Cruz, CA

My heart is a tree
and it's trying
to get some wind.

Simon Christy, grade 1
Gault School, Santa Cruz, CA

What is the connection for students between reading and writing poetry?

Giving children the opportunity to write poetry is not only a tremendous tool for teaching writing of all kinds, it's also a tool for teaching reading, because what motivates children more to read than the desire to read something they've written themselves? Even if it's just a matter of how quickly they can memorize their three-line poem, that's a prereading activity.

I don't think you can write poetry well without reading it. Some people say, "I don't read anything because it really messes up my writing," and I think, "How well are you writing?" We don't live in a vacuum. We don't live in a cave. Reading is inspiration. I forget what poetry is all the time. I can give you a logical definition, but in terms of accessing that part of myself, I forget. It's the antithesis of the rest of my life. I certainly experience spirituality when I'm out on my bike or making dinner, or making love, but connecting words to it, making a whole out of the invisible, isn't what my daily life is about. I forget the way poetry insists that we pay attention in an astute way.

So before I start writing I usually read poems just so I can watch how people welcome it in their inner life, how they translate it into words. So also with kids I begin by reading poems as a way to enter into poetry. It's a link, an important connection.

You often arrange for students to read on the radio or on stage. What's the importance of featuring student writing in public places?

How do we recognize adult writers? They publish and read their works publicly. If you tell children they're authors, albeit beginning authors, they deserve a similar forum. In our culture there's a sense that you don't get anywhere until you grow up. I think children's lives and experiences should be incorporated into the adult world. Not, "Isn't Sammy cute," but "Who is that person?"

It's striking how surprised some people are when they hear students' poems — even teachers and principals if they haven't been working a lot with writing. There's this notion that since kids are cute like puppy dogs they have the minds of puppy dogs, but they're very sophisticated. Their minds and hearts deserve recognition and respect.

Children should be eminent members of our society. We should call on them. It serves children and it serves society to learn who children are. As a kid I thought grown-ups didn't understand me. How can we understand the inner life of a child? Poetry is a phenomenal way to do that. There would be a lot less injustice toward children if the people making decisions would listen to the poetry children write. We wouldn't cut child welfare. You can't minimize children when you read their poetry. It makes people behave more responsibly toward them.

Also, telling them their work is going public, and for it to be understood they need to follow certain rules, encourages them to revise and edit. I don't think it's right to tell children that everything they write is a masterpiece. That's just not true. For children, their span of attention is short, so often they're finished with a poem in 15 or 20 minutes. One way to approach editing and revision is through using what everyone calls portfolios now. Collect a series of poems and ask the students to pick which poems to edit and revise, though frequently when I publish anthologies, I pick the poems because often children pick the weakest ones, the ones they feel least vulnerable about. We tend to feel less vulnerable with work that is predictable and doesn't push the boundaries of what we think is acceptable in terms of content and form. Of course, I only publish poems with their permission.

You're writing a book on teaching poetry. How's that going and what will it cover?

Writing, "This is what I think, feel, experience," was very hard at first. For awhile all I did was confront my internal critic. By the end of the day I'd be crumpled in my chair shivering, asking, "Will you ever get a publisher anyway?" But I believe in what I'm writing, so I stuck with it. Now I've written some stuff I really like and I think I can write the book. I've settled into the writing.

It's a book for adults who want to bring poetry into children's lives, predominantly classroom teachers, but also librarians, psychologists, parents. There will be a section on how to make poetry part of family life, and on writing one-on-one. In addition to my perspec-

tives and experience, it will include activities, planning lessons, what makes excellence, the necessity for original thought.

What does make a poem excellent?

We only have so many experiences as children, as adults—we fall down, cut our knee, overeat, succeed, fail, experience water against our skin, a kiss on our chin, get lost in the woods, get found, we're loved, abandoned, we behave kindly or do not. How many general subjects are there? What we love, what we know through our five senses, projections into the future, memories of the past, feelings of compassion, anger, longing. There's a limit to our experience, but there is no limit to the language we can affix to it.

The number of poems that come from children on the metaphor of what's at the bottom of their hearts, of what's at the core of their feeling—so many images speak to that experience. Through poetry we can write in evocative ways that create the nuance of emotional experience, giving voice to moments, fragments, particularities, details, to how the psyche works, the particularities of experience that, though we're all so different, we have in common. Excellence in poetry is about expressing that in evocative ways.

Part of it is using image. Modern poetry is highly imagistic: it makes concrete pictures that describe experience. The idea is to move from vagueness into specificity, to use language that's visceral, that employs the senses. Sam Hamill said, "If you can say it in one word, why say it in three?" There has to be an element of mystery. You want to tell your reader almost everything, but not everything. You want to leave room in the poem for the reader to enter. You want magic to happen—surprise, leaping from one image to another when only the heart knows the connection. Poetry is a distillation of language, a spiritual language. Excellence in poetry is, in part, the presence of soul in the language.

How do you evaluate student poetry? How do you assign it a grade?

I don't grade poems. I'll give grades, but not on individual poems. The grades I give have to do with effort and development or progress. Is the student working up to potential? When I evaluate children's poems I let them know there's some subjectivity involved. Poetry isn't like addition; there isn't one right answer. I'll say to the students, "This is my opinion." If you make clear what you're looking for in the beginning and see them striving to include that in what they're writing, that's the basis for a grade.

How does your own writing affect your teaching of poetry ?

I know what I'm talking about when I ask students to write a poem. I'm not asking them to go off a high dive I haven't jumped off before. To teach poetry you have to know what it's like to write poetry, to grapple with the constraints of the form. As a writer of poetry I bring empathy. It makes me real to the students. I can read my own poems, show them some drafts, ask them for advice. "What's this line need? What's missing?" That's why I encourage teachers to bring poetry into their lives. Keep journals, write with their students when they can, incorporate poetry writing into faculty meetings, read poetry in and outside the classroom, get up a half hour earlier once a week to write, notice what motivates them to want to write, then write about it.

If you see writing as another task, you won't write. Accept what comes. Trust your impulses. Write for the sake of feeling the pen in your hand and the words falling to the page.

How does your teaching of poetry affect your writing?

When I'm teaching a lot, it stymies me. At the end of four hours of teaching I'm wrung out. Other things don't wear me out like teaching poetry does. But what a fine way to get tired! When I'm teaching less, being with the children is inspiring.

What has inspired or influenced you as a teacher?

My mother read me poetry and sang me songs even before I was born. Knowing, as a young child, where literature could take me was inspiring. Reading still inspires me. Right now I'm reading Homo Aestheticus, by Ellen Dissanayake, who writes about the biological need for art, how art is a way to celebrate events in our lives—the writing of Charles Simic, William Stafford, Pablo Neruda, Jane Kenyon, and Eavan Bolland, to name a few.

It inspires me that I don't have life figured out. The passion of life inspires me, and the fact that that passion can be expressed through words. Once I was accused of encouraging children to write sad poems. But poetry is a celebration of life. Writing fills my life with happiness. The fact that sorrow and longing can be articulated is call for happiness.

Patrice Vecchione and a student imagine on paper

Teachers who value kids inspire my teaching, watching them engage intimately with children. More than anything, children are my inspiration for teaching. My goddaughter Kyle and my two nephews Nicholas and Joshua deeply inspire my teaching. When you're with kids, you see that there's reason for poetry.

What have you learned from teaching poetry?

That the human imagination is infinite. Writing poetry allows us to say what we don't expect to say. It's a direct line to our imaginations. Imagination is unpredictable; it can reveal what we don't know we want to reveal. A lot of answers to a lot of questions will come from it. W. H. Auden, in a poem about Yeats, said, "Poetry makes nothing happen." That's fascinating. Bridges don't get built through poetry. Wars don't stop. But in the world of the soul? That's where transformation occurs. William Carlos Williams said, "Only the imagination is real." Everything is born from imagination.

The next line of Auden's poem says poetry "survives in the valley of its saying." In valleys there are echoes, repetitions, but Gertrude Stein said, "There is no repetition." It's impossible. We all change the emphasis. We all vary the emphasis. That's why this thing that in some ways is very simple has completely captivated my life. It's never the same. In three dozen third grade classrooms, the same poem will never be written twice.

Don't underestimate what children can write. They can write beyond their wildest dreams, say things they didn't know they could say. Have high expectations. They'll rise to it. I see kids use language all the time in ways they and their parents and teachers wouldn't have thought possible.

I've learned compassion for teachers and kids. When you're teaching poetry, you're doing soul work. Don't leave compassion out. It's the most important thing to bring into the classroom.

Roger Bunch edits the Central California Writing Project Newsletter. This interview is reprinted from the December, 1997 issue.

I'm Listening to You:
A Poetry Writing Lesson

by Patrice Vecchione

Choosing lessons is an intuitive process. Lessons should be developmentally appropriate, engage the students' imagination, and preferably relate to other areas of the curriculum. I take clues from the students' responses and the poems they write. This, however, is a good beginning lesson:

Poetry is something to listen for, words which, at times, seem to come from a long way off. What are those words calling to us? Since we rely heavily on sight, even when we devote a poem to what we are hearing, we're likely to make a poem we can see as well as hear. To make our imagery fuller, it's good to wake those sleepier senses. I use this poem by Robert Bly:

Listening to a Cricket in the Wainscoting
That sound of his is like a boat with black sails.
Or a widow under a redwood tree, warning
passersby that the tree is about to fall.
Or a bell made of black tin in a Mexican village.
Or the hair in the ear of a hundred-year-old man!

This poem works with children as young as kindergartners, and it's evocative for older children as well. You may need to define wainscoting, a good word to illustrate how the sounds of words can surprise and delight us. The short poem begins, "That sound of his is like a boat with black sails," and ends, "Or the hair in the ear of a hundred-year-old man!"

To begin, we talk a little about the day's writing idea, then I read a poem or two, rarely more than three. I like to read poems at the beginning, to invite the imagination in, then discuss what we could write. I may ask, "What do you listen for? What wakes up your ears? What sounds scare you? Think of those that let you know something good is going to happen, like the sound of a friend calling you, inviting you to play." I may read a poem again before we write to stimulate the imagination, to move away from sequential, predictable talk into the realm of anything-can-happen-now.

Following is a poem written by one class of seven- to ten-year-olds. After deciding what we should imagine listening to, they each wrote "What I'm Listening To" poems, then I served as scribe as they offered lines out loud for the following group poem:

Listening to a Waterfall from the Side of a Road
Near a Chinese Garden
That sound is like a faint, out of tune hurdy-gurdy.
The water falling into my washtub.
Ten cats hissing at me.
The beat of an African drum.
A 90 year old woman opening a door.
The water falling from my faucet.
The steady beat of a tabla.
The silvery star and the golden moon.
The high pitched crashing of a bagpipe from Spain.

by Matthew Bush, Erin-Kate Escobar, Justin Fisher,
Bennet Jackson, Sally Nordgren,
Bethany Thigpen, and Daniel Vahradian

* "Listening to a Cricket in the Wainscoting" by Robert Bly is from *This Tree Will Be Here for a Thousand Years* and is also in *The Invisible Ladder: An Anthology of Contemporary American Poems for Young Readers* edited by Liz Rosenberg

Book Review

Deciding to Lead

DENNY WOLFE and
JOSEPH ANTINARELLA

Portsmouth, NH
Heinemann, 1997.

◆

Reviewed by
JOSEPH MILNER

Joseph Milner is chair of the Department of Education at Wake Forest University and is director of the North Carolina Writing Project State Network.

Denny Wolfe and Joe Antinarella have written a wise book about school reform that celebrates the authentic core of teachers' experience in writing projects. Though they do not set out to praise the National Writing Project, their book makes it clear that the basic requirements for authentic school reform and the outcomes of writing projects are the same. Reform, according to Wolfe and Antinarella, depends upon the professional growth of teachers, the essential result of any teacher's experience in a writing project.

In the authors' view, professional growth involves more than merely learning new classroom techniques. They suggest that the foundation for all growth and reform must be built on a healthy relationship between teacher and student. In this regard, they advocate "seductive teaching," relying on the fourth definition proffered by the *Random House Dictionary of the English Language*—"Seduce: to win over... attract... lead." In presenting their portrait of the seductive teacher, they challenge some educators' callous assumption that inner city students are tough and must be treated with toughness instead of love and understanding. They argue for an "amorous bond" rather than a tough contractual relationship with students. Over thirty years ago, when David was my student at Smith High in Atlanta, I may not have described our relationship as an "amorous bond," but I did have some sense of what the authors are getting at. David was the youngest of four brothers, three of whom were serving time in the Atlanta Federal Penitentiary. They were tough and David did everything he could to let me know he was a tough hombre too. His language was out of bounds, especially for those more genteel times. Once, when I asked him to take his seat so we could continue, class he snarled, "F— you, you long legged sack of shit." I knew then I had to set some limits for David. I asked him to leave class for ten minutes and think about his language. But after that incident I kept reaching out to him by talking to him about his two great passions: stock car racing and Suzie, his dog. Slowly our relationship turned around and David became my biggest supporter. When the year ended he took up a collection from his classmates, many of whom were poor, and bought me a wild Hawaiian sports shirt.

I try to communicate the importance of this kind of caring to my preservice teachers by having them read and discuss Sapphire's brilliant novel *PUSH*. In this novel, we see school from the very sad perspective of a tormented thirteen-year-old, Precious. Life for Precious is brutal: it is punctuated by poverty and abuse. Precious is hostile toward her English teacher, a hostility

grounded in her life situation. Finally, a teacher at a special school reaches her by listening to her terrible life story and helping her through her pregnancy. When my students come to understand Sapphire's almost devastated Precious, they recognize the quality Wolfe and Antinarella urge them to find in the needy hearts of such buffeted children.

While the authors urge educators to have caring attitudes toward their students, they recognize that this alone is not enough. Educators must also understand the complexity of the culture in which they work. Wolfe and Antinarella tell us that declining SAT scores are only a symptom of the deeper problems students face, particularly illiteracy and violence. On the subject of violence, the authors assemble a sobering array of statistics:

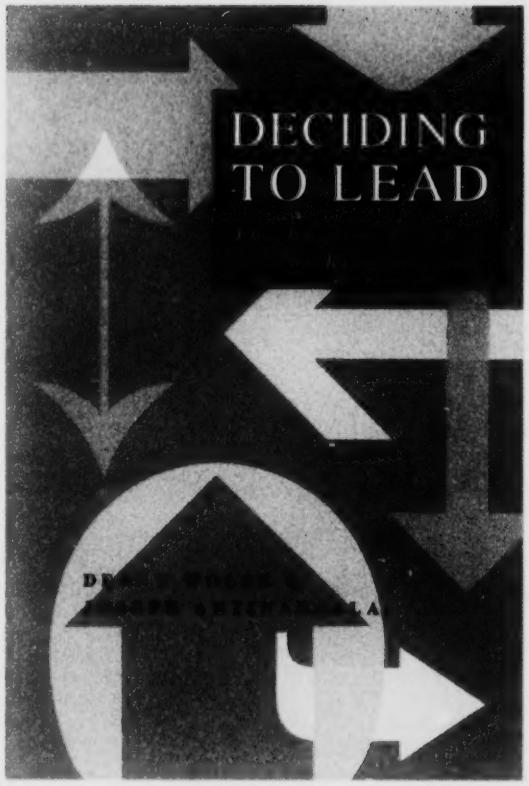
> *NEA Today ... reports that the number of children killed by firearms between 1979 and 1981 equals the number of Americans killed in the Vietnam War; that every two hours, a child dies from gunshots; ... A 1993 Harris survey ... says that twenty-two percent of students polled claimed they took weapons to school in the previous school year ....* (p. 23)

As to their claims about illiteracy, the authors rely partially on the work of Jonathan Kozol which, although a decade old, still comes close to the present reality:

> *... fifteen percent of recent high school graduates from urban high schools read below a sixth-grade level; eighty-five percent of juveniles who come to court as alleged criminals are functionally illiterate.* (p. 15)

To the systemic problems of violence and illiteracy, Wolfe and Antinarella propose a partial solution:

> *Whatever else "English" is, it's language — the language that often invades the soul. Whatever the literature canon is that ennobles that language, it must include works that deal with conflict — strenuous and wrenching conflict that likely will provoke many different ways of questioning, valuing, and perceiving.* (p. 38)



Wolfe and Antinarella believe that educators better understand educational complexities than those critics who have only the vaguest notions of real classrooms and real students. *Deciding to Lead* shows us that trusting teachers and helping them to take their own growth steps is the essential way to ensure reform of public education rather than turning these efforts over to the world of business. It is teachers acting with personal autonomy and independent judgement, not outsiders who focus on the bottom line, who are most likely to bring to the classroom attitudes that will help students who must negotiate very rough lives.

What Wolfe and Antinarella do most concretely, perhaps, is speak to classroom teachers by offering them simple yet thoughtful suggestions of things to do to encourage professional growth and support the best in school reform. One of their suggestions that is as dangerous as it is right is to speak out against reforms that smell bad. They ask teachers to "resist reform strategies you don't believe in." They add:

> *If we honestly and rationally recoil from some 'reform' idea in our school, if we truly believe it will not help us and our students do better work, we should make our objections heard as effectively as we know how. If we are known to be good at what we do, if we are known to be 'team players,' if we are a presence in our schools, if we don't cry wolf too often, we can sometimes win our points. Not always, but sometimes.* (p. 113)

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The authors know that recalcitrance in the service of sloth or timidity is the enemy of any serious school reform, but they also know what writing projects preach – that teachers must decide. Exclusively top-down reforms won't get it. So teachers who have confidence in their instincts and their knowledge of best practice have to blow the whistle on mindless movements that whirl through schools like late summer hurricanes.

At my university, for example, funding for computers has been almost unlimited; along with this overwhelming support there is a belief that computers in the classroom will automatically mean improved teaching. I do not want to stand in the way of innovation that will improve instruction, but I fear that computers are too often being used to prop up a dated presentational style of teaching. If teachers do not have the decision-making power and do not articulate their serious qualms, schools will lay prey to any loony idea that has fuel and funding to propel it. Teachers must, Wolfe and Antinarella tell us, insist upon occasion that the Emperor indeed has no clothes.

Wolfe and Antinarella suggest a number of other leadership acts that are less risky but demand good instincts and lots of commitment:

> When asked, help.
>
> Relate to colleagues as you relate to students.
>
> Promote cross visitations in teachers' classrooms.
>
> Conduct classroom-based research and share it.
>
> Communicate regularly with parents.
>
> Promote/organize teacher led seminars.

These are some of their best suggestions. The first is almost a litmus test for commitment, the engine for true leadership. I know colleagues who are extremely busy but never too busy when asked to help. As the Director of the North Carolina Writing Project, I am amazed that the busiest site directors are always ready to take on any task in order to keep the state network alive. In my department at Wake Forest University, it is the same. I marvel that many overworked teachers will volunteer to do one more job. Others only look out for their own interests, moan about their burdened life and offer lists of insurmountable tasks as an excuse.

Finally and maybe most helpfully, Wolfe and Antinarella hold up four stages of professional growth as a mirror to any teacher who reflects on self. Their stages do not merely describe growth; they offer teachers a way to set aside the comfort of doing things the same old way and challenge themselves to try new ideas and step out of old patterns.

Emulation/Control: Beginning teachers teach as they were taught. Control and classroom management are overriding priorities.

Experimentation/Discovery: Learning from colleagues becomes paramount. Collecting new ideas and experimenting are central.

Facilitation/Resource: Philosophy and theory drive teaching. Students are encouraged to be active learners.

Research/Innovation: Educational philosophy and classroom practice are integrated. Reflective researchers become sophisticated students of teaching.

The first of their four growth stages aptly captures the way most of my students enter the profession. They have images of the great teachers they have known at my university and hope to emulate those revered professors. My work however, centers on helping these bright and dedicated students see a more appropriate way to relate to adolescents in a secondary English classroom. They initially envision themselves offering rich insights to their students about the poetry of Yeats or Virginia Wolfe's fiction, but they put these visions aside after a time and work to develop structures which allow students to work out a text's meaning for themselves. Classroom management is initially their greatest concern. Partly because of their inexperience, they have a difficult time recognizing themselves as leaders in their classrooms. They are so familiar with the student's role that they identify with that part of classroom life rather than the high profile of being a teacher.

After a year or less they leave this early stage behind and start to lean from important mentors. They begin to develop a repertoire

of teaching activities that engage and challenge their students. Eventually they carve out their own philosophy of teaching and learning, recognizing the necessity for students to take responsibility for their own learning. Finally, they become real leader-teachers who integrate theory and practice and take on the role of reflective researchers.

Wolfe and Antinarella present examples of teachers whose work has evolved to this advanced stage. One of these teachers is Bob Tierney, a writing project teacher consultant who is known nationwide as a science educator and advocate for writing across the curriculum— and definitely a "seductive teacher":

> *Bob Tierney became a researcher/innovator in his classroom, relentlessly pursuing more effective ways to teach and testing the results. Furthermore, he became a teacher of other teachers, a 'teacher's teacher.' Over the last decade, he has conducted scores of workshops and seminars for other teachers – teachers of both science and other subject areas – all across America and abroad. In these workshops and seminars, he describes his own teacher growth, his beliefs as a master teacher, and the details of his own classroom experiences.* (p. 57-58)

Wolfe and Antinarella provide a self-help guide which prompts teachers to steer themselves toward a deeper sense of community yet stronger sense of autonomy. Some educators have been accused of naming what they can't fix, but Wolfe and Antinarella are fixing as they name. Teachers, project directors, educators and others can learn much from their book.

NWP Announces Fred Hechinger Award

Sarah Freedman, former Director of the National Center for the Study of Writing and Literacy, and professor of education at UC Berkeley, and NWP Executive Director Richard Sterling invite nominations for the 1998 Fred Hechinger Award. The award honors the late *New York Times* correspondent and co-chair of the CSW National Advisory Board.

The award is presented annually to a teacher who, through classroom practice, workshop presentations, and professional writing, makes significant connections between research and practice. This spring, site directors will receive further information about the award. Each site will be encouraged to nominate one teacher.

A committee consisting of former CSW researchers, NWP site directors and teacher consultants will review the applications and select the 1998 recipient. For more information, contact Julie Chase at the National Writing Project at (510) 643-1742.

Correction: The poems that accompanied the piece, "Sound and Sense: Grammar, Poetry, and Creative Language," in the Fall 1997 issue of *The Quarterly* were written by Ray Skjelbred. We regret the error.

Beyond Blank Books and Laptops

by

JULIA TUCKER-LLOYD

◆

In the corner of my basement stands a big farmer's table I bought at a flea market. This table serves as my desk, and on it I have placed a computer and a printer I borrowed from my classroom. Next to the computer, I have stacked thirteen blank books that I've collected over the last three years. No book is similar in size, shape, or color to any other. Some of the book covers are reproductions of the work of famous artists like Monet and Van Gogh, another is a quilted pattern, still another a map of the world. One cover I made myself, a collage of stickers of tea pots and tea cups. Many of these books are no longer blank. Neither are they organized. They are chaos; they are filled with notes to myself, pictures, quotes I like, an occasional sketch or even watercolor if the paper is right. I have jotted down lesson plans, bright ideas, responses to reading, lists of books and the names of movies I want to see.

Many of the books also hold my own writing, scattered jottings in the earlier books and then more and more expansive entries in the more recent ones. I loved writing on these pages. In the process I became an author, a photographer, an artist, a scientist, a teacher, a movie critic, and a book lover. I would take one of my blank books with me wherever I would go, shyly returning it to it's place in my black bag if someone asked, "What's that?" Caught in the act of writing, I became suddenly conscious of my book's tattered pages and aware of my illegible scrawl and my juvenile photographs and drawings. As a writer and artist, I was not a bundle of confidence. Yes, I wrote with my class, trying to be a part of my students' writing community, but as their teacher I felt distanced by time and circumstance. It was difficult for me to join them. So I settled for endless first drafts of possibility. While I pushed students through the writing process, I stayed behind.

I believe now that I signed up for the Northern Virginia Writing Project because of my blank books, though I doubt I would have put it that way at the time. Rather I would have talked about the teaching of writing, strategies and practices I hoped to learn and apply. But the truth was I just needed to write. The time had come for me to bring my writing to life on the other side of my Monet covers; the time had come for me to live inside a community of writers. If that community was also a community of teachers of writing like me, that would be a bonus. I brought a computer home, thinking, "Now I can become a real writer, have desktop folders, appropriately labeled, and pieces in different fonts and sizes that I can edit right on the spot." But I soon realized that my computer, like my blank books, was merely a place to store my writing. What I wanted to do was to get my writing out in the world.

This is not to say puttering around with my "blank books" and my new high-tech toy was not fun. I went through my writer's notebooks and folded down pages of chicken-scratch I wanted to turn into fancy fonts and point sizes on the word processor. I remembered forgotten moments, found obscure half-pieces that seemed to be written by someone else. As I typed, I edited some, though I'd been told to bring in only first draft writing. "Just for clarity," I rationalized. I hoped, prayed in fact, that my group would like my writing. That's all I wanted, really, just someone to like it. To be truthful, I wanted to know if I were really a writer and I accepted the idea that if someone who I hadn't even met liked my writing then I would be

a real writer. But the opposite possibility also loomed. Suppose they didn't like my writing? I felt both guilty and hypocritical as I realized I put my students through similar torture regularly.

When I shared my first three poems with my writers' group— people who I still couldn't positively identify in a crowd— I read fast and furiously, a horse out of a delayed gate. And then, silence. I imagined bolting from my chair, grabbing my bag and leaving, but I couldn't. Although I was certainly not a professional writer, I was a professional teacher, so I stayed. I learned in that endless moment that silence kills. It killed these poems and maybe poems and other writing yet unborn. A suggestion, a question, even a nod or a creased brow, followed by a positive cursory comment would have sent me home, tired at five, but reading, writing and typing until long after my household slept. Instead I was immobilized.

I tell this story to remind us that while writing groups may inspire they may also devastate.

Over time, however, I began to see this incident differently. I began to realize that I too was part of the silence. I came to understand that a writer must bear the same responsibility as other members of the group. She must be willing to ask questions and to discuss her intent. Feedback demands input, sometimes beyond the words on the page, and I had been unprepared to offer this help.

It takes courage to pull one's purple pen scrawlings from among the Oriole tickets and souvenir postcards that dominate a blank book, putting them out there in the world. Maybe it takes even more courage to confront silence with "this is what I meant." But that may be what is necessary to give a piece of writing a life of its own.

Julia Tucker-Lloyd teaches English at Woodson High School in Fairfax, Virginia, and is a teacher consultant with the Northern Virginia Writing Project.

Reprinted from the Northern Virginia Writing Project Newsletter, *edited by Linda Blair.*

The Now of School

continued from page 8

Our classrooms are filled with students living in complete turmoil, whose lives are more complicated than a child's should ever be. Some of them make it to school, others pack their bags and move on. Yet even despite severe poverty and little home support, most kids "make it." The only stability that exists in their tumultuous lives is found at school. Here is the one place where the societal deprivations of poverty and isolation can be overcome. To try to prepare these students for "real life" ignores the real life they now experience.

It seems, then, that creating a test for measuring a student's future success is irrelevant. We cannot tell the future because the future doesn't stand still. We are all evolving, and neither the future nor our students stop to wait for the other. My students looked into the faces of the future, and none of them felt connected or even interested in the possibilities. They showed me that school must be more than what "the test" expects. No test can measure how they will interpret what they learn, nor the potential they see for themselves.

School is not fake. It creates links: person to person, idea to idea, dream to dream. Daily I witness students challenging themselves by meeting the demands of their course work, searching for connections and opportunities to learn, and measuring their performances against curricular expectations. They fine-tune a paper, connect with a passage, or encourage a friend. They ask important questions and laugh at their mistakes. And when we blend the exuberance of youth, the curiosity of minds, and the safety of thought, we create places where real learning and thinking prosper. This is real.

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The Quarterly
OF THE NATIONAL WRITING PROJECT

Spring 1998 Volume 20, Number 2

Writing Projects and School Reform:
A Local Perspective

by

MARCIE WOLFE

◆

All those familiar with the National Writing Project understand the Project's core beliefs: we have powerful, complementary convictions about the transformative power of literacy and of teacher leadership. When colleagues engage each other in writing projects, many come to see themselves as teacher leaders, inspired not only to transform their own practice, but also their educational communities. At the New York City Writing Project, these beliefs are firm, but the ground in which they have typically been planted — the ground of our city's schools — now shakes and shifts with the rumblings of school reform. We are affected at every level — as teachers in reforming schools, as partners in school-based professional development, as teacher educators, and as members of a visible and vocal entity with a long history in our city.

As we have been called upon more and more to support teachers in a climate of educational change, we have needed to ask ourselves, what does a school reform movement mean to a local writing project? What, if anything, changes for us as the school system changes? How do we develop our work in ways that build upon our past and also tilt toward the future? In this piece I will describe how our writing project collaborates with and examines one facet of NYC school reform — large high schools recently broken up into small schools — and in the process raise issues about our writing project's future.

The New York City Reform Scene

The New York City reform scene is a crowded, untidy house. At the time we were writing our proposal for Students at the Center (SATC) — the DeWitt Wallace-Reader's Digest initiative in which the Philadelphia, Illinois, and New York City Writing Projects participate — we charted 22 separate reform initiatives in New York City schools. Our colleagues in other SATC cities each had one. There was so much going on, and

so little cross-initiative articulation. The chart we developed was, at the time, the only such chart in the city — the Board of Education asked us for a copy.

So using the word "reform" in New York is like showing someone a Rorschach test. It's a loaded term these days, one which swings left and right so much that I often think I have to duck. "Reform" includes everything from vouchers for private schools to community-run freedom schools. But for purposes of this article, I use the words "school reform" to suggest what Seymour Sarason (1971) might call a disruption in the prevailing culture of school, and which he and others have detailed as dramatic changes in time, structure, habits, and size that together suggest a different view of teaching, learning, and children (Donahoe 1993; McLaughlin & Talbert 1993).

While there has been much national attention devoted to New York's new small schools, I wish to focus my discussion of reform here on the large high schools undergoing redesign. Redesign in New York City most typically involves phasing out a large school over a number of years and gradually replacing it with smaller theme-centered schools. This restructuring process, underway now in at least five schools around the city, has been initiated by the Board of Education as a response both to the realities of continual low performance in a number of schools and to threats by the State Education Department to close the large schools that have failed most consistently.

Although the New York City Writing Project's school-year professional development program has been working intensively in high schools for 15 years, typically in three-year relationships with particular schools, until three years ago we had not ever partnered with a redesign school. When borough superintendents began requesting that we bring the writing project's work to such schools, we hesitated, apprehensive about being viewed as "fixing" teachers in a climate of imposed reform. But additional high schools are placed in redesign each year; if we were to continue working in our city's schools, we needed to confront both the realities and the possibilities of these contexts and find a way to relate our work to them. Professional community is a key goal of our school-based writing project work: could a redesign environment promote empowerment and leadership among teachers in ways that improved teacher practice?

Our most senior redesign partnership, with the schools that together once were Erasmus Hall HS, is now in its third year. Through this work and subsequent work in other such places, we have learned much about the structures and staffing of redesign schools. Like most other redesign schools, Erasmus Hall has been subdivided into theme-based schools that share a building and some common space. The Erasmus schools, for example — The School of Humanities & Performing Arts, The School of Business & Technology, and The School of Science & Mathematics — are housed in different wings of the old school's landmark building, and share the cafeteria, gym, and library. The themes are meant to give students and their families some choice in selecting a school and to serve as a framework for developing curriculum.

Another characteristic of redesign schools is that they are able to make school-based decisions about time. While one other redesign "campus" decided to follow the same bell schedule across all four schools, at Erasmus each of the three schools has its own schedule and has made its own decisions about the use of time. At the Humanities School, for example, classes are 50 minutes in length, and scheduling in the ninth grade accommodates a fair amount of team teaching in English and social studies across blocks of 100 minutes. Students leave early on Wednesdays so that the faculty can meet as a larger group and then break into teams for planning.

Redesign schools also share a number of features related to staff roles and relationships. Each theme school has a principal, but few assistant principals. Consequently, teachers participate in school governance, coordinate much of the administrative detail, and in some cases play a role in supervising and supporting their colleagues. At Erasmus Humanities, for example, staff are experimenting with peer coaching, but the principal also observes most teachers, and outside supervisors visit the school to review new teachers at regular intervals.

An important feature of the redesign schools, in contrast with New York City's new small schools, is that staff and administrators must work together to reimagine schooling in places with a previous history and culture. Erasmus, like other redesign schools, was required to keep a percentage of the original staff before restructuring, some of whom are cynical and hostile to the change. Working side by side with the

veterans is a significant percentage of teachers fairly new to the classroom and more culturally diverse. Some of the newer teachers may be more open to and energetic about reform, but are still trying to learn their craft, often without much preservice preparation. The differences in age, perspective, experience, and culture complicate discussions of school vision, governance, student expectations, and instruction.

Finally, I need to make clear here that the writing project is not the only professional development group that works in the redesign schools. Not surprisingly these schools often house multiple such groups. This is because, as most of the restructured schools have been designated as failing and need to demonstrate improvement in student outcomes, district administrators have sent in their staff developers and invited in outside professional development groups to work with teachers to address these problems. Often, a "more is more" philosophy prevails without attention to whether or how the outside resources invited into the schools might be compatible with each other and with the school's needs. Through the Students at the Center initiative, the writing project and three additional professional development groups work in the three Erasmus schools. Also contributing to professional development at the Erasmus schools are an on-site United Federation of Teachers teacher center, Outward Bound, and district-based staff developers. While there is some coordination among these entities, there is not nearly enough.

Our Work at Erasmus Humanities

Our work at Erasmus Humanities, led by teacher consultant Alan Stein, a high school history teacher released from his school to work full-time with the writing project, is teaching us much about the role we can and do play in reform. What follows here is a description of how we began our work at the Erasmus schools, with a specific focus on Erasmus Humanities, how that work evolved over three years in the school, and what we are discovering from it.

We have learned over the years that the school context influences the kind of success we can have in our professional development work, and redesign contexts were new to us. So at the outset, in addition to providing our typical school-based program — professional development seminars and on-site support focused on teachers' classroom practice — Project Director Linette Moorman and I urged Alan, as a writing project pioneer in such a context, to participate in and learn as much as he could about teachers' work outside (as well as within) the classroom.

We knew that teachers in such schools often take on multiple roles; they serve on policy councils, curriculum committees, and the like. We were eager to learn through Erasmus whether the writing project might influence and assist classrooms and committees, thereby encouraging a professional community that would lead simultaneously to the development of practice and the structure-supports that nurture it. So Alan spent a lot of his early time at Erasmus Humanities asking if he could come to meetings, and then observing and listening to teachers talk about school and classroom issues such as classroom management, student discipline, and students' literacy development. We also asked Alan, a former union activist, if he could put aside his carefully-nurtured suspicion of administrators and make a link to the principal, Carolyn Wagner. Luckily, both Ms. Wagner and Alan quickly saw the ways in which her vision for the school, "where everyone is a teacher, a learner, and a

leader," intersected with the writing project's work, and a solid collaboration was born.

It was slow going at first. But some of the things that made it hard also made it work. On one day, early in the first semester, the teachers participating in the on-site seminar all arrived late, having just endured a day-long inspection from state monitors and district administrators. Teachers were crushed; Alan rightly saw that something had to be done. He put the agenda aside and asked teachers to write about the day and about the pressure they'd been experiencing. They wrote of the school's past attempts at reform, their questions about their own impact on students, and the negative perceptions of their work held by others. The time they spent hearing each other's writing helped establish the writing project seminar as a safe, protected space in a school under siege.

The seminar became a place to consider simultaneously issues related to the teaching of writing and to the ethos of the school. When Alan and teachers conducted close descriptions of students' work (Carini et al. 1986), everyone learned something about teachers' assignments and about the support students need to grow as writers. But out of these experiences, teachers also began to construct a new perspective on the students, a new view of them as complex thinkers and writers. And later, when teachers in a workshop pursued the theme of immigration, writing about and sharing their own families' immigration experiences linked them to their students — a largely Caribbean immigrant population — in ways that encouraged a greater awareness of and appreciation for who the students are.

Outside of the seminar and the classrooms, Alan supported the teacher-leaders of several committees. Working with a writing project participant from the school, he organized and facilitated a writing and response group so that a core group of teachers could draft and publish a school constitution. He initiated reflective-practice study groups — at once an effective formative evaluation structure in redesign schools and a generative form of professional development where teachers brought specific curriculum projects or student work for review by their colleagues. And he met with representatives from other professional development groups to determine where they might collaborate in the interest of these students, teachers, and schools.

Alan's work at Erasmus Humanities altered dramatically our sense of what our school-based work was about. Like our other on-site teacher consultants, Alan worked with teachers on the teaching of writing and reading. He assisted with history-class book groups, a student publication in a Shakespeare class, and writing-to-learn strategies in a government class. He helped teachers present on staff development days. But Alan also participated in the school's coordinating committee, its theme infusion committee, and its school-based planning group. He reached out via the writing project network to teacher consultants in exemplary small schools and arranged for Erasmus teachers to visit. "I've come to be recognized as a major resource," he wrote in his journal during his second year in the school. "I provide materials, I make suggestions, I provide readings, I provide contacts outside the school. And this is done in a collegial, egalitarian manner." Alan has extended the notion of teachers-teaching-teachers from classrooms to school governance and policy forums. In this journal entry, he describes his support of teachers involved in school-based planning:

> *I've attended all but one of the school-based planning [SBP] meetings, and I've met with Lisa to discuss some of the problems I've noticed last year and now. There tends to be limited participation, domination by a few, and a too widespread feeling among a minority that this is just another reinvention of the wheel, an administrative fiat that has nothing to do with them. Out of these discussions with Lisa has come the formation of a coordinating committee that has taken up the issue of how to make SBP more invitational and more effective and more directly related to teachers' needs and interests... Lisa chaired the first meeting,... and asked the participants to write about a SBP team experience, either positive or negative. This was then shared, and the discussion moved on to what was needed to improve the process, and what actions needed to be taken to accomplish the aims.*

An essential notion for us in our writing-to-learn work — that writing helps to make our thinking recoverable — transferred to Alan's policy work in the ways in which writing began to be used by teachers in their school-based planning and curriculum committees.

The changes in Alan's role, and later in the roles of other on-site teacher consultants in redesign schools,

necessitated a change in how our writing project site supported them and further integrated a school reform emphasis across all our work. In line with the writing project's growing emphasis on documentation, Alan and other on-site teacher consultants keep journals of their work, which they share in weekly meetings for each other's observations and advice.

The writing project interest in reform has moved beyond our work at individual sites. As a writing project continuity program, Associate Director Ed Osterman has led a Saturday reading group for teacher consultants focused on school reform; teacher consultants have read a number of provocative pieces, among them, *The Dreamkeepers* (Ladson-Billings), *What's Worth Fighting For in Our Schools* (Fullan), *Other People's Children* (Delpit), *Beyond Discipline* (Kohn), and the New Standards Project's materials, and have discussed the implications of these ideas for their own work as teachers and writing project teacher consultants, and for the school reform community in New York City. Those teacher consultants who are themselves leaders of reforming schools have coordinated advanced summer institutes focused on leadership for literacy. And, across projects in the Institute for Literacy Studies, where the NYC Writing Project is housed, we have collectively considered issues of entry into schools, ways of working alongside teachers without taking over, and approaches to documentation and group facilitation. All of this work serves as a resource to Alan and the other redesign pioneers.

What We're Learning

The lessons of our work are ongoing. Here is some of what we've discovered.

1. The writing project remains a powerful model for teacher development. As we all know, writing and sharing practice are transformative experiences for teachers. These elements are still the irreducible core of our work. Using that core, Alan and others, at their sites, are building a cadre of teachers willing and able to lead, leachers whose work is visible to their administrators and colleagues. These are the teachers who serve as co-leaders for our seminars at these sites. Further, having key teachers from restructuring schools participate in our summer invitational has become an essential piece — a luxurious opportunity for professional growth and collegial support.

2. What we've all learned together as writing projects about good professional development has broad applicability beyond the classroom. We are applying our values about writing, learning, and teacher knowledge, our facilitation skills, and our specific ways of working to committee and policy work. We've seen the writing project help to develop at Erasmus Humanities the habits and rituals that nurture a new culture. One small example that's made a world of difference: As Alan's earlier journal entry augured, most governance and curriculum meetings now include some writing, are facilitated in ways that allow everyone to be heard, and are documented. In the spirit of teachers teaching teachers, leadership of meetings has been decentralized and is now the responsibility of teacher facilitators. Each team on school-based planning keeps a ledger that collects the writing that comes out of meetings — minutes, notes, ideas for proposals. And this work proceeds with the support, guidance, and participation of the principal, the "keeper of the vision" (Louis, Marks, & Kruse 1996).

3. The expertise of writing project teachers, celebrated and promoted by our sites throughout the country, can make a significant difference in the quality of some redesign schools and, by extension, of any reforming school that places its trust in teachers. Our work at Erasmus Humanities seems consistent with the growing number of studies focusing on the effects of professional community; these studies suggest links between the quality of teachers' interactions with each other and outcomes for students (Louis, Marks, & Kruse 1996; Lord 1994). Teachers who work with Alan at Erasmus Humanities are becoming the leaders of the school. In their commitment to sharpening their own practice, they are models and resources for their colleagues. And in their emerging roles as co-coordinators of site-based writing project seminars, team facilitators, and school planners, they shape and sustain the professional community that both embodies and enacts the school's vision.

Looking Ahead

We are taking an inquiry stance with this work, and questions are emerging from it. Here are three:

First, as we participate more in the policy life of the school, focusing on the contexts that support practice, we by necessity must spend less time focusing on practice itself. What is gained or lost in this realignment of our role?

Second, as we join with restructuring schools living under a State microscope, how do we define the terms of our own accountability in ways that both respect the school's circumstances and interrogate the State's measures? Our vision of school for teachers and students is much broader than student achievement tests alone will demonstrate. How do we negotiate external pressures while we raise internal voice?

Third, as we see the power of the writing project's influence within a redesign context, how do we codify, learn from, and draw attention to this work? Identifying the elements of our success seems essential, but we must do so without becoming seen as yet another recipe-based school reform model.

This year marks the 20th anniversary of the New York City Writing Project. Some of us who participated in its early summer institutes and have remained involved know firsthand the relationship of writing projects to school reform. One of our liveliest discussions over the years has focused on whether our role in professional development was to serve the school or to support individual teachers. Now, in the last three years, we have found ourselves moving away from that oppositional debate. We are developing double vision — with our eyes at once on the school and on the teachers. It's been challenging work, and we've been changed by it.

I would like to thank Alan Stein, Ed Osterman, and Linette Moorman for their contributions to this article.

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Syntax at an Early Age:
A Mother Challenges the Experts

by

NATALIE KRAMER

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The woman on the other end of the phone was saying, "I've written this article. I'm sure you won't have any interest in publishing it." She was quick to admit that she had no formal expertise, that her opinions were out of the mainstream and that her only experience as a teacher of writing was as a tutor of her own child. But as it turned out Natalie Kramer did send along her piece, "Syntax at an Early Age." We were delighted to receive an article by a parent, and we were struck by the importance of her major thesis: the systematic teaching and learning of sentence structures is not getting enough attention in American schools. Realizing Natalie makes many controversial points, we asked Stanford professor and former editor of The Quarterly *Melanie Sperling to offer her views on Natalie's ideas. This decision initiates what we hope to be a regular feature in* The Quarterly: *a dialogue between parents, teachers and others in the school community with academics working in the field of literacy education.*

—The Editors

I am a self-proclaimed writing tutor. Even though I strongly believed my young son needed more instruction in writing, the decision to teach him myself left me with nagging doubts. As I was only 24 when he was born, I had always felt more like my child's older sister than his mother. Neighbors would watch us as we chased each other down the street playing tag. My son, whose behavior seldom required my correction, saw me primarily as a playmate, not an authority figure. That is until he entered second grade. But let me explain.

Several years ago, I decided to enroll Alex in kindergarten at a private French school on the outskirts of Washington D.C., a decision that turned out to be one of the best I have ever made. My husband and I place great emphasis on education, and the educational philosophy behind this school closely matches our own. The academic program is strictly regimented by the French national program. Everything from grade-by-grade content to methodology is proscribed. The curriculum is highly structured, with traditional, fact-based, direct instruction used for the basic disciplines. In history, for example, the fifth graders learn about the changes in society following the industrial revolution. They learn the historic context for those changes, the events that led up to them and the consequences that followed. Then the children use the facts they've learned about the past to examine issues in today's world, such as union elections.

Despite the apparent rigidity of the program at the French school, the curriculum also stimulates the children's imaginations and gives them the tools that allow them to be creative. As a result of the highly rigorous training the children receive in French language skills, for example, they are able to write wonderful stories and poems in French.

Students at the French school begin to learn to read and write in English in the second grade. Alex had no trouble learning to read in English. Since he was firmly grounded in phonics in French, he transferred his skills with very little effort into English. In fact, reading in English has been one of his greatest pleasures in life.

Writing was a different story, however. The English language program at the school is not overseen within

the curricular guidelines imposed by the French system. Alex received no instruction in writing English in the second grade. Most of the time in the English class was spent discussing "fun" things and reading "fun" books out loud. The teacher did not use a textbook; the children were not given any workbooks. Once in a while, the children would get ditto sheets with spelling words handwritten on them. The words did not seem to follow any pattern, either phonetic or thematic. The teacher sometimes administered spelling tests following the distribution of these sheets. She corrected the tests but never returned them. Instead, she glued them diligently into a notebook, which she kept until the end of the term. The children didn't see their mistakes corrected in some cases until several months after having made them, and the corrections were never explained in class.

At the same time, the children brought home writing assignments, some of which were projects, some book reports. These writing assignments followed no perceptible rationale or sequence. One of the book reports was on a 90-page biography of Abraham Lincoln. One of the projects involved cutting out of paper the upper body of a giraffe, attaching it to the lower body of a fish, decorating the product with felt and cotton balls, and writing about where this imaginary creature lived, what it ate, and what it liked doing for recreation.

My greatest surprise was not that I could not find any good syntax materials; it was that I could not find any at all.

The children were unprepared to tackle these projects. Their sentences were incomplete and incomprehensible. The children's writing could only be understood when they explained orally what they meant to say in writing. Their "sentences" rambled for lines. Some had no subjects; some, no predicates; some, neither. The children had no notion that written discourse is not a verbatim transcription of the informal conversations they had with each other on the playground where subjects and predicates do not always matter. Who could blame them? They had never been taught otherwise.

At first, I tried to stay out of it. What could I, a nonnative speaker of English (my native language is Russian), who was not always sure of her own grammar, teach a child? When I realized that Alex had developed an aversion to writing in English, displaying clear signs of distress at his inability to complete the language arts assignments, I spoke to his pediatrician, a lovely older Hungarian lady, who immediately faxed me an excuse from English for Alex (which I did not use). Looking for more practical solutions, I began reading about writing instruction. I consulted a certain number of specialists — a county language arts coordinator, a language arts specialist at our State Department of Education, an editor of language arts materials at Houghton-Mifflin — who agreed that children should become acquainted with the grammar and syntax of subjects and predicates and should have experience breaking sentences into manageable pieces. Finally, to ease Alex out of his frustrations and to compensate for the instruction he wasn't getting at school, I began tutoring him in writing. I thought it would be a temporary measure, but three years later I am still at it.

Even though at the beginning I resented having to do the English teacher's job, I do not regret having become Alex's writing tutor. This necessity forced me to become a better writer myself; it made me a more disciplined and a better organized person. Most importantly, I am grateful watching Alex's skills improve as a result of my efforts. English is a bond that we now share and I hope that Alex will remember our lessons with fondness and appreciation. I certainly will. We laugh a great deal as Alex readily puts to use his wry sense of humor; we both learn new things. It is a pleasure to teach him; he is eager and quick to learn.

But teaching Alex sentence structure has turned out to be no easy task. My model was the language instruction I had received in Russia in the seventies, which included rigorous, explicit, and repetitive training in syntax. I could not have imagined that anyone would attempt to teach writing to children without instructing them in syntax. In my mind, syntax was to writing what the alphabet was to reading. I began searching for some good syntax materials.

My greatest surprise was not that I could not find any good syntax materials; it was that I could not find any at all. I carefully examined several major textbook

series. They contained a few isolated exercises on sentence structure, but most of the practice focused on conventions such as the series comma, quotation marks, exclamation points, and capitalization. I called a local teaching aid store and explained to a bewildered clerk that I needed materials for teaching syntax to an elementary school-aged child. I was put on hold. When the clerk returned, she explained that she had consulted everyone at the store and that they carried no materials on "cineplex." Despite this, I decided to see for myself what the store carried and I did find some workbooks that included a limited number of exercises on simple sentence expansion and, for older children, on sentence combining.

Smokey and Motey always offer Alex their unwavering support.

I used these workbooks to teach Alex simple sentence structure. The Instructional Fair series for second and third grades had the most useful exercises. Each workbook would include one or two practice exercises for each skill. For example, a child would have one or two opportunities in each grade to practice adding a predicate to a subject supplied in the exercise or adding the "where," "when," and "how" details to a bare bone sentence. This was exactly what I was looking for, since Alex's sentences still looked like transcriptions of isolated utterances — but these occasional exercises were not nearly extensive enough. The textbooks we used as children in Russia included similar exercises in each lesson, so we could build each skill to the point of perfection before moving on to the next stage. The words we used for these sentence structure exercises were supplied. They were taken from the vocabulary unit that we would be working on at the same time. This pattern would be repeated week after week, which allowed us to progressively build the needed skills from the early grades. Using the patterns from the Instructional Fair workbooks and my recollections of how I was taught some twenty years earlier, I began creating my own exercises for Alex.

Alex and I first established that every sentence had to have a subject and a predicate. I would supply fragments of sentences, and Alex would combine them using correct capitalization and punctuation, putting verbs in correct tenses, and providing missing prepositions. So *Smokey* (our big cat) / *Caddy* (our terrier) / *to hiss* became *Smokey hissed at Caddy*. At that stage, had I asked Alex to write a text without these kinds of exercises, he would have likely produced a fragment, believing that the subject might have been mentioned earlier and not knowing that he had to worry about where it was. In the English class, he would not learn that a sentence had to be a complete thought until fourth grade, yet he had to submit elaborate writing assignments beginning in second.

After Alex mastered the main sentence types, we moved on to modifiers, learning simple modifiers in third grade and clauses and phrases in fourth. This was a pivotal point for Alex. He began to truly overcome his aversion to writing in English when he realized that his sentences could be expressive and powerful. Learning to add different kinds of modifiers and to place them correctly helped Alex realize for the first time that writing was an essential tool for organizing ideas and expressing them clearly. He finally learned to write most of his sentences in such a way that he did not have to explain them to the reader orally first.

The work on modifiers is continuing to this day and is now included in our exercises on complex and compound sentences. Thus, *Smokey scratched Caddy* gradually became:

Smokey, first lurking in the shadow cast by the sofa and then leaping out like a miniature leopard, scratched the whimpering Caddy on the forehead.

If I had not taught Alex to combine pieces of information such as the ones in the sentence above, he would still be serving them in bite-sized, choppy sentences as many of his classmates still do in fifth grade.

To construct this kind of sentence, I provide the basic information *(Smokey lurked in the shadow, Smokey scratched Caddy)* and Alex contributes the colorful details *(like a miniature leopard)*. He then constructs the sentence himself, which the two of us then tighten up by eliminating repeated nouns or correcting misplaced modifiers. I believe that this kind of practice in sentence combining is essential to good writing. If I had not taught Alex to combine pieces of information such as the ones in the sentence above, he would still be serving them in bite-sized, choppy sentences as many of his classmates still do in fifth grade. I would still be seeing

The couch cast the shadow. Smokey first lurked in it. Then he leapt out. Smokey looked like a miniature leopard when he did that. Smokey scratched Caddy. He whimpered.

It took several months of focused practice for Alex to learn the ways in which he could combine these bits of detail into one sentence. As K-12 publishers were not providing the systematic, structured instruction in syntax I believed necessary, I turned to the basic composition text from my English 101 course at the University of Maryland to structure the exercises for Alex. A whole chapter in that textbook is devoted to modifiers. For each type of modifier described, including modifying clauses and phrases, there is an exercise.

Along with the practice on using and placing modifiers, we did some exercises that helped Alex learn to distinguish between restrictive and nonrestrictive clauses. This concept requires some logical thinking, which Alex found interesting and challenging, as I believe it would be for most of the thousands of fifth graders who are not getting this instruction. Just like with modifiers, I supply the pieces and ask Alex to combine them in one sentence. For example, I write: *The students were tired after a long field trip. The students asked for some quiet time.* Alex combined the sentences: *The students, who were tired after a long field trip, asked for some quiet time.* I explain that when the clause is set off by commas, it can be omitted without the loss of essential information. We then discuss the difference between the above sentence and *The students who were tired after a long field trip asked for some quiet time.*

Many children like to be challenged by these kinds of activities. Alex boasts sometimes that he is using a college textbook. In reality, there is very little in the sections that I use in it that he cannot easily handle, yet the grammar exercises that Alex's teacher assigns to his fifth grade class still consist primarily of identifying nouns and distinguishing between proper and common ones, something these students successfully learned to do in French in second grade.

Although constructing sentences about our five pets is still Alex's favorite exercise, I combine our work on syntax with another curriculum strategy that seems to be out of favor. Last summer I found a wonderful vocabulary workbook for Alex in Scotland. I take words from this book, such as "vigil," "decrepit" or "dilapidated" and ask Alex to create sentences with them. I do not believe it is enough to ask a child to come up with just any sentence for practicing vocabulary. If I told Alex to use the word *dilapidated* in his own sentence, he would write, "My house is dilapidated." While he may be practicing the spelling of *dilapidated*, this exercise would be of limited value. Instead, I supply sentence fragments in which the word is already placed in an appropriate context, and Alex practices the various constructions that we have been working on. For example, when practicing absolute phrases and appositives as modifiers, I supplied the following details, including one of our new words:

Smokey's eyes were flashing. Smokey kept vigil by dad's seafood casserole. Smokey is a notorious thief, beggar and glutton. Smokey waited for us to turn our heads away from the table.

Alex then wrote:

Eyes flashing, Smokey, a notorious thief, beggar and glutton, kept vigil by dad's seafood

casserole, waiting for us to turn our heads away from the table.

I believe that Alex understands that writing sentences effectively helps him create powerful and interesting or funny images, and he enjoys having this ability. Children like being empowered. Having only limited power in many other areas of life, they equate accomplishment with empowerment, be it in sports, at school or in any other area of their activity.

Why, then, is syntax not routinely taught as a part of writing curricula? Why do the authors of a college textbook find it necessary to devote nearly half of its pages to syntax instruction? As my experience with Alex has shown, a fourth- or a fifth-grader can easily handle most of this "college" material. Most other countries do not teach or even review basic grammar in college. In fact, we would be hard pressed to find any educational system outside the United States and Canada that offers basic composition courses beyond middle school. With the advent of the Internet, I was able to pose the question of what happened to instruction of syntax to several professional organizations involved in teaching writing. One of the responses I received suggested that syntax was "in part a lost art." The explanation continued as follows:

> *Possibly, in an attempt to stay away from worksheets and drills, the profession moved toward larger units of discourse (paragraph and above), expecting sentences to be formed in the context of writing for real purposes and audiences (letters, reports, appeals, etc.). Departure from syntax instruction also may be a symptom of the move away from formal grammar instruction that has always analyzed syntax without necessarily improving the students' ability to produce sentences.*

Why did the profession make this move on a hunch that sentences are formed by osmosis in the context of "real" writing? Was there any scientific or even anecdotal evidence that would lead to this conclusion? Or was it wishful thinking? When I look at the writing of my American-born colleagues educated in the era of "larger units of discourse and writing for real purposes," I can't help but think that the hunch was just that — a hunch. Here are a few examples:

> *All members were present, John was the lead and Sylvia was the scribe. The meeting began with the discussion on Define Benefits flow chart decision was made to acept the define benefit chart as is.*

> *HEALTH CODING TIP: Care for out-of-area participants in open ended HMO*
> *In the bazaar case, were the participants can only get care out-of-area in open ended HMO plans code the plan as a "traditional fee for service".*
> *If you have any questions please see me or Frank.*
> *Thanks, Gwen*

> *The section called "Discharge planning" in the SPDs, located in the managed care section, is not scrutinized by our analyst. Additionally, if it were reviewed the analyst would not find the language they are suppose to look for.*

Why did the profession make this move (away from syntax instruction) on a hunch that sentences are formed by osmosis...?

These representative communications were certainly written for "real" purposes, and were directed to colleagues or bosses. Writing is one of the critical elements in our performance standards. The authors had every incentive to write effectively and correctly. Don't these examples suggest that we need more than incentives and real purposes and audiences to equip people with the needed writing skills and habits?

How we write not only defines our identity as individuals, it defines us in relation to our linguistic and cultural heritage. Rules of written language engender centuries of tradition that are passed from generation to generation. By not teaching these rules to children we are breaking the ties they should form as speakers of English to the linguistic heritage that is legitimately theirs.

Teaching children syntax includes far more than simply teaching them the parts of sentences and how those parts fit together. Diagramming sentences and learning grammar out of context through rote memorization is not what thorough teaching of syntax is about. These activities alone will not teach children to construct their own sentences. If we look at how

children in non-English speaking countries acquire literacy skills in their native languages, we will see that in addition to direct practice in application of syntactic and grammatical rules, they are also taught to model their writing on examples of mature writers.

For his French classes, Alex has to prepare weekly dictations by memorizing several lines of prose and writing them from memory in class. When I was in elementary school, every week we had what was called précis writing, whereby we would hear a text several times and then relate its content in our own words. Several times a week, we would have homework assignments in which we would simply copy a text taken from a well-known writer. Alex studies Russian once a week from a tutor who still gives these assignments to her students, and I can see their positive effects. All of these types of skill practice, if done consistently — and consistency is the key element here — are beneficial in more than one way. They help children internalize correct sentence structure, word usage and spelling so that they may gradually form the habits of creating correct grammatical and morphological structures in their own writing.

These activities are also excellent tools for teaching style in writing. While in Alex's French school, stylistics is also taught directly in later grades, dictations, memory writing and copying of passages from literary works in the early grades help children lay a foundation for rhetorically effective writing later on. These activities are also a means of forging children's ties to the literary tradition in their language. Alex's Russian teacher assigns some of the same texts and poems that my husband and I learned in school. When we hear Alex practice these pieces, we can supply the missing words from memory, in some cases remembering them for the first time in thirty years. What is wrong with this kind of sharing of literary tradition? What is so rote or terrible about a dictation or a recitation of an elegant literary passage? In what way do these activities interfere with creativity?

I have never seen Alex plagiarize Anatole France or Guy de Maupassant, but no matter how imaginative he is when he writes in French, his syntactic and stylistic structures are beginning to show subtle signs of their collective influence. Studying and memorizing their texts has not suppressed the originality of Alex's writing; these disciplines have helped his originality surface and shaped his stylistic taste. This is the direct result of five years of solid, sequenced instruction in syntax and correctly provided exposure to literature — text analysis, memorization — literature examined from the point of view of the power of literary techniques and not merely on the level of what the characters do and why, the only way Alex's English teacher looks at it.

The following paragraph written by Alex illustrates that fifth-grade writers can incorporate advanced syntactical skills and still express their unique and childish individuality:

A Special Pet

Cardigan Lewis Gittelson is my special pet. The first reason he is so special is that he is very calm; he is almost phlegmatic. Unlike my other pets, Caddy lets me eat and watch T.V. in peace. The second reason is that he is the most sensitive little guy I know. Once, my mother called Caddy a mean and stubborn terrier because he wouldn't go out into the back yard. Offended, Cardigan immediately obeyed my mother's orders. Another reason why I think Cardigan is such a special guy is that he is so funny; he is afraid of my cats! About two years ago, my cat Motey scratched Caddy. Caddy was so traumatized by the incident, that ever since, he has been cautious around both Motey and, just in case, my other cat Smokey. Yet, another reason why I believe Mr. Gittelson is such a special pet is that though he is the quiet type, he loves to listen. Whenever I have one of my school crises, I tell Caddy what happened and he hangs on to my every word, never interrupting. Still another reason is that he simply adores people. He can lick them dawn to midnight. The final reason why Gittelson is such a special pet is that his favorite pastime is sleeping. He could sleep 14 hours a day, 7 days a week, 52 weeks a year! Cardigan Lewis Gittelson is the best dog I know.

Alex wrote this piece at the end of fifth grade, when I assigned a "reason" paragraph to him from the "Writing Skills" workbook by Educational Publishing Service. The "audience" consisted of Alex and me; the "purpose" was learning to correctly use transitions. Yet in this paragraph I notice some carry-over from the "isolated" syntax instruction of previous months. What I notice most of all, however, is the style of an all-American eleven-year-old kid with his infectious humor and passion for animals. No amount of dictation or syntax practice would ever be able to take that away.

I have heard many times that sentence structure is important, but you should "worry" about it only at the end of the writing process, during the editing and proofreading stages. Solid literacy instruction helps ensure freedom from "worrying" about sentence structure at all stages of the writing process. Writing correctly the first and every time can become almost second nature. Of course, editing and proofreading are still necessary because everyone needs a distance from a written piece to assess its strengths and weaknesses, but not because sentence structure concerns should be put off until the end.

Russians often say "koocher dovesyot" when they poke fun at someone who is trying to legitimize his ignorance. Literally it means "The coachman will take me there." This line belongs to one of the characters from classical literature. This fellow tried to explain that there was no need for him to be well versed in geography because his coachman knew how to get places. Yes, the coachman-editor will rewrite our poorly constructed sentences and the computer will correct our spelling errors. But if the editor has to rewrite our sentences, how much of our own style and individuality will remain?

And besides, what is there to be lost by all of us becoming proverbial "coachmen," so we can all "get there" on our own? Writing is essential in almost all areas of personal and professional life. Writing defines in part our personal, professional and cultural identity. It is the link to our linguistic heritage. In the process of developing syntactic competence, we help our students think logically and make them aware of the creative possibilities of language. Let's restore to our children their inalienable right to become empowered and skilled writers, not merely fluent ones, no matter what else they choose to do in life.

Natalie Kramer was born in Leningrad, USSR, where she lived the first seventeen years of her life, moving to the United States in 1979. She is an economist at the Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor.

My Perspective:

A Response to "Syntax at an Early Age"

by

MELANIE SPERLING

◆

With his love of learning, a largely supportive school environment, an encouraging family, and a passionately caring, highly literate mom, Alex is in an enviable position for developing into an ever stronger reader and writer. To me, Natalie suggests in her account of tutoring Alex some critical principles of teaching and learning — and of literacy — that Alex's situation reflects but that sometimes in the realities of school and classroom life are liable to be overlooked. None of these principles seems much to do with syntax, yet I believe they help to account for Alex's learning to manipulate sentence structures through his mom's tutoring and, so, may have a great deal to do with syntax in the end:

- Teaching and learning are in many ways acts of love and faith, undertaken between individuals who believe in one another's abilities — the teacher in the learner's ability to rise to the occasion of transforming unanalyzed experience into valued skills and knowledge, and the learner in the teacher's ability to "stand for" the broader cultural landscape into which he is gaining access through this critical teacher-learner association.

- Learning to write is largely a cumulative process that depends on time, on repetition, and on the teacher and learner's assumptions that the

way they habitually fill the time is relevant to the culture and society in which they live.

- Literacy — the acts of reading and writing, as well as the texts read and written — shapes and defines human relationships. It is not surprising that "English is a bond" that Natalie and Alex share. Language and text-based bonds are the stuff of a literate society.

- In literate contexts, whether at home, in school, or in the community, lived experience and textualized experience appear almost to meld: textualized versions of experience assume value and a life of their own.

As none of these principles (except perhaps the last) gets expressed as such in this essay, I push them in order that they will be the kinds of generalizations that get remembered from Natalie and Alex's experience.

I worry that, in contrast, Natalie and Alex's unique mother-son/teacher-learner relationship appears to support what I believe are some unsupportable generalizations, which do get either articulated or implied in this essay, and I want Natalie to rethink them. Specifically, I cannot support the implication that

- poor and haphazard teaching (Alex's English teacher appears by Natalie's descriptions to be a pretty weak teacher at best) is not simply poor and haphazard teaching (sometimes a cigar is, in fact, simply a cigar) but rather a reflection of some broadly accepted yet wrong-headed theory about teaching written English in the schools

- the "thousands of fifth graders" who are not learning about restrictive and nonrestrictive clauses (or, for that matter, about cumulative sentences) in their classrooms would find the experience as compelling as Alex does working lovingly with his mom

- any fourth- and fifth-grader can "easily handle" college material on writing, including practice with language structures

- educational systems in the rest of the world are comparable to the U.S. and Canadian systems and that if basic composition courses (which presumably focus on language structures) can't be found in them beyond middle school (an observation that I unfortunately have no means here either to refute or corroborate) it is because all students in those systems have mastered composition. (I think, for example, of highly stratified educational systems such as that found in Great Britain, where *only* students who have already shown a mastery of academic skills have access to higher education. Theoretically, "basic" courses would not be offered because "basic" students are not admitted.)

- the American-born among the workforce do not, ipso facto, write clearly or conventionally and that, moreover, we have to blame for this situation a curriculum that has left syntax in the lurch. These generalizations are troublesome in no small measure because they are based on inadequate data.

The heart of Natalie's article, however, is not expressed in these relatively peripheral points. The question she asks is: Can and should syntax be taught, particularly to elementary school children? Natalie shows us that Alex has learned a lot about sentences and that he gained this knowledge by, at least in part, actively producing sentences at his mother's behest. But Alex's progress stems not merely from the fact that Natalie and Alex study syntax — it is also the context in which this learning takes place. Some of the ways Natalie works with her son are a prescription for effective practice. All that I have read and experienced convince me that to master extended writing (which by definition includes sentence-level structures) across real communicative contexts, children need an intimacy with written language. This mastery is fostered in part by reading a great deal from different types of texts, in part by doing lots of writing of different kinds along with getting feedback on how they are doing, and in part by addressing language structures consistently and above all in meaningful ways. While many of these practices are becoming increasingly common in American classrooms, Natalie and I would agree that there is little evidence that meaningful instruction in syntax occurs as a matter of course.

However, by placing so much emphasis on a single instructional technique —sentence combining — Natalie may be overlooking the nature of syntax as a

living, changing, context-defined language characteristic, part flexible linguistic convention, part personal style, that reflects, among other things, the writer's purpose, the particular content that needs to be communicated, and the particular social/cultural situation in which communication takes place. Which is to say, most of the time, it doesn't do to write like Faulkner.

So, Natalie's essay alerts us to the genuinely perplexed positions in which teachers and others operate as they try to promote language and literacy development in our schools. All students need to learn how to read and write. And they need to be taught in ways that foster comprehending, analytic, and culturally astute thinking.

Thus, in the spirit of adding to the store of information that Natalie has already developed, and to help clarify some of the interpretations of language and learning in her essay with which I disagree, I offer the following research-based observations:

- It is true that children cannot read if they do not "get" the alphabetic principle, and most children need deliberate instruction in sound-letter correspondences in order to break the written code. But children *can* write without deliberate instruction in syntax. Syntax is not to writing what the alphabet is to reading.[1]

- Part of the writing development process is for text to increasingly carry the writer's meaning, with decreasing need to supplement text with oral explanations or other symbolic tools. That young children's writing needs partially to be "explained" to be understood reflects, then, a normal part of their literacy development.[2]

- Despite this focus on early childhood literacy development, taking the point of view of readers — who need appropriate contextualization and cues to understand what they read — is a writing skill that is ever in process: mature adult writers, not only children, have often to explain what they've written (including their sentences) and need reader feedback to nudge them into being more explicit, more clear, more informative than the writers themselves realize they are being.[3]

- Students need feedback on their written work, no matter whether they are writing sentences or extended pieces of discourse (or writing spelling tests, or ...) as immediately as possible, from teachers and when appropriate from peers or others. As Natalie knows from her work with Alex, students cannot simply write for real audiences and real purposes and learn to write. Alex is certainly writing for a real audience, his family. But we cannot conflate teaching that encourages writing for real audiences and purposes with teaching in which students do not get other kinds of instruction, including feedback on their sentences. The two are not — and should not be — mutually exclusive.[4]

- Children do not simply "transcribe" simple isolated utterances when they write, in part because, like adults, they don't think in simple isolated utterances. The very fact that novice writers produce stilted or choppy sentences indicates that writing is not a simple translation of thought or speech, but a complex sociocognitive transformation — which can be coaxed through teaching.[5]

- Practice in sentence-combining is not essential to good writing. It can be a challenging linguistic exercise that allows children to manipulate sentence structures and in that way become more analytical and knowledgeable about language. As Natalie's case suggests, it can also be a kind of enjoyable language game that people share with one another. But students also need to be able to adapt their language according to communicative contexts, which raises the question of whether sentence-combining practice in and of itself "transfers" — and such transfer has not been proved generally to occur.[6]

- "Writing correctly the first time and every time" sounds like a dream come true. But writing is more than shaping sentences into sophisticated structures. Since writing means reading and interpreting the world, making contact with others, taking one's place within different text-based communities, it is an activity fraught with false starts and inappropriate realizations, at every level of language. Knowing this is knowing something important about the writing process.[7]

All that said, I want to return to Natalie's story about teaching Alex to write and to underscore the following insights from her story. Writing does help to define our personal, professional, and cultural identities. And writing does hold infinite creative possibilities. Knowing these things is at least in part why Natalie cared enough to tutor Alex in the first place and, later, to write about the experience — and why I wanted to think seriously about what she wrote and to offer this commentary as my perspective.

Notes

[1] See seminal work by Read, C. (1971), Pre-school children's knowledge of English phonology. *Harvard Educational Review, 41*(1), 1-34; Snow, C. (1998), *National Academy of Science study on the prevention of reading difficulties in young children*, presentation to the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Diego, CA.

[2] See literature on children's early composing, e.g., Himley, M. (1986). Genre and generative: One perspective on one child's early writing growth. In M. Nystrand, *The structure of written communication: Studies in reciprocity between writers and readers* (pp. 137-157). Orlando, FL: Academic.

[3] Dyson, A.H. (1989). *The multiple worlds of child writers: A study of friends learning to write*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

[4] Nystrand, M. (1986). *The structure of written communication: Studies in reciprocity between writers and readers* (pp. 137-157). Orlando, FL: Academic.

[5] Freedman, S.W. (1987). *Response to student writing* (Research Report No. 23). Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.

[6] See meta-analysis by Hillocks, G. (1986). *Research on written composition: New directions for teaching*. Urbana, IL: ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication Skills.

[7] Flower, L. (1994). *The construction of negotiated meaning: A social cognitive theory of writing*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.

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Quarterly Solicits Reviews for New Column

The NWP Quarterly will soon be initiating a new feature, a column of mini- book reviews authored by site directors, teacher consultants and other readers. In this way we will be able to alert subscribers to many more important books in the field of literacy education and school reform.

These reviews will be a maximum of 500 words. If you have in mind a recent book you think our readers should know about, please call us at (510) 642-0976 and we will send you our guidelines and a copy of the book. If you want to review a book but don't have a specific title in mind, call us for some ideas.

In Memoriam: Gene Ulansky

We announce with sorrow the death of Gene Ulansky, a member of *The Quarterly* Advisory Board and a teacher consultant with the Bay Area Writing Project. Gene, 60, died suddenly in April, the victim of a heart attack.

Gene's influence as a writing teacher is recognized throughout the Bay Area. He taught writing courses at the University of California, Berkeley, the University of San Francisco and St. Mary's College. Additionally, he had his own free-lance editing business, Writing Repair. An avid hiker and racquetball player, Gene will be deeply missed by his family, students, colleagues, and many friends.

Ghetto Ease

by

MICHAEL JACKSON

with introduction by

LINDA RENEÉ MCHENRY

◆

The instructor said,
"Go home and write
a page tonight.
And let that page come out of you—
Then, it will be true.

I am twenty-two, colored born in Winston Salem.
I went to school there, then Durham, then here
to this college on the hill above Harlem.
I am the only colored student in my class.

So will my page be colored that I write?
Being me, it will not be white.
But it will be
a part of you, instructor.

Langston Hughes, "Theme for English B"

This poem by Langston Hughes written decades ago has a currency that suggests it could have been penned last week. The two experiences, the two voices — black and white — inhabit along with many others common space in many classrooms.

There is no question that, as Geneva Smitherman (1977) emphasizes, speakers and writers of Black English can effectively express their hopes, dreams, fears and goals. The strength of this dialect, however, has not led to its acceptance as a legitimate means of communication in many settings. Faced with negative responses to the way they speak and write, African American students who are inspired to acquire skills in standard English precariously straddle two distinct and sometimes hostile worlds.

The following essay, written by my student Michael Jackson when he was an undergraduate at the University of Oklahoma, makes vivid the conflict faced by students whose primary language is Black English. Michael's firsthand account of the feelings of alienation and oppression challenges us all to find ways to teach communication skills in ways that do not devalue our students.

To understand the nature and development of literacy we need to consider the social context in which it occurs — the political, economic, and cultural forces that encourage or inhibit it. The canonical orientation discourages deep analysis of the way these forces may be affecting performance.

— Mike Rose, Lives on the Boundary, p. 237

Ghetto Ease came natural to me. I was taught this from the moment I was born. In my household and around my friends this was how we talked; likewise we thought everyone talked like we did. I didn't realize people spoke any differently; not until I started school did I first realize the difference between the language of the Ghetto Ease and the "American language."

It was like I was a foreigner when I started school and I had to learn a new language. The phrases teachers used were different from what I used. For example I would say "Me and him went fishing" and the teachers would correct me saying "He and I went fishing." I felt embarrassed at first because in a sense we were saying the same thing, but they were pushing my language to the side like it was uncivilized. I became

silent in class afraid to speak. I was afraid I would say the wrong thing. As soon as I got on the bus or around my friends I relaxed and started talking again because I felt comfortable speaking in my own private language of Ghetto Ease. Sometimes the bus driver would tell me to be quiet, in class the teacher told me to talk. In a sense this made me two different people at home and around friends I was very talkative and at school I was the quiet one who always sat in the back.

I can recall a specific event when I realized that my language was different from whites. The event happened when this boy "got in my face" and passed gas. *I stomped a "mudhole" in this boy.* The teachers sent us to the office to be punished where the principal asked me why we were fighting. I said "Because he lost his manners in my face." The principal responded, "That's no reason to fight someone." I thought to myself, *I don't know where she came from but where I come from we don't play that.* Then it dawned on me she didn't understand what I was talking about. I didn't want to say the word fart because when I was at home I'd get in trouble and I didn't know if I could say it in front of her. I realized right then we were on two different levels. I felt bad because I couldn't express myself to her; I was only in the second grade.

As I got older and further in school I learned I had a handicap; I spoke Ghetto Ease. Whenever I wrote in another language from the one I spoke in, my papers weren't that good because I didn't know how to tell a story using their words and phrases; I didn't feel free when I wrote. If I could have written my papers using Ghetto Ease, I think they would have been a lot better because I could have written more freely. I wasn't allowed to practice my language, the language I was comfortable with, the language I talk in around the house, the language I listen to in my music, the language I talk to my friends in. Therefore, I was a poor student in English. I think that's why the majority of white students did better in English than me because they grew up talking like this so it wasn't new to them. The things I thought sounded stupid sounded good to them.

This raises some questions. Why should we as "American Blacks" be forced to change our language in order to be considered educated? Is our language really that hard to understand? Or is it just politics? I think that this proves this world is influenced largely by the White race. If they came into my neighborhood talking like they talk, they might feel uncomfortable or not understand what is being said like I did when I came into their environment when I was young. They would want to learn to talk like us because they would feel uncivilized. I wish school was taught in Ghetto Ease for a week and those who didn't speak it would have trouble like I did.

In the past I thought that putting down Ghetto Ease was a conspiracy to make Black people look bad. In a sense it's not a conspiracy because it's done in the open. They make us express ourselves in their language, something we are not that familiar with. Then they want to label us slow learners, because we can't master their language. They just want to "Whiten Us," make us forget our culture, and where we come from.

Now I know two languages so I know what's going on in the Hood and I know what's going on in the World. I still speak Ghetto Ease today when *chillin with my friends.* It's like our relaxed language where we understand what's going on. If you can't speak Ghetto Ease we don't hang with you in the Hood because you wouldn't understand.

As soon as I go to class it's back to the "American Way." I think one day when we get rid of the attitude Superior and Inferior our language will be accepted as civilized. Then we will be truly equal, both languages accepted and freedom to travel back and forth from one to the other.

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Scribe to the Prophet

by

KIM STAFFORD

◆

Kim Stafford is director of the Oregon Writing Project at Lewis and Clark College in Portland, OR

As a writer, I learned something very consoling from Harriet Graesser, a wise woman in Iowa and a member of The Community of True Inspiration. She was talking to a group of writers — we had intruded on the historic meeting house at Amana where she was a volunteer to deal with tourists — and she began telling us about the custom in her tradition of the *werkzeug*, the "instrument" of God. In the last few centuries of her tradition of belief, she said, there had been seventeen *werkzeuge*, men and women both — prophets who spoke in the voice of God, delivering essential doctrine to the community. Community worship services, she explained, derived largely from reading the thousands of utterances that had come through these prophets, with each listener, young or old, woman or man, searching as they listened for understanding and practical insight toward right living.

It was when she described how these utterances were recorded that my writer's radar began to go wild. According to Mrs. Graesser, each prophet, once identified, would acquire a scribe, whose life-duty it then was, both night and day for as long as the prophet lived, to stand ready with pen and paper to take dictation should the Voice arise. In the middle of the night, the scribe, asleep in a room adjacent to the *werkzeug*, might be wakened by the Voice beginning to speak. The scribe must then rise quickly, light the lantern, and begin writing what that Voice, through voice of the *wertzeug*, was saying.

In that moment, I understood my role as a writer in a new and comforting way. I am not the prophet, but scribe to the prophet. It is not my work so much to invent as to record the stories of the world. And the prophet? My prophet may be the voice of anyone I overhear, or the particular witness of anything I see. The prophet could be a child, a bus passenger, a dream, or a cloud. The prophet could be the day's last light, falling with eloquence on some simple place. It is not my job to be wise, to be profound in my own creation, but only to be completely alert. My aptitude is attention, recognition, and humility. When the spirit moves in the world about me, I am not called to be that spirit, but to be its secretary.

My father's first job after World War II, as I understand it, was to be secretary to the director of an organization called Church World Service. What a clear beginning for a writer's career. As I sat in the meeting house at Amana, listening to the gentle voice of Mrs. Graesser describe the lifelong work of the scribe to the prophet, I felt the greatness of the smallness of my task.

The Parallel Universes of Theory and Practice: One Teacher's Journey

by

Beverly Paesano

◆

In *My Many Colored Days*, Dr. Seuss writes:

Then comes a Mixed-Up Day.
And WHAM!
I don't know
Who
or What
I am!

But it all turns out all right,
you see.
And I go back
To being ...
me

On the last day of the 1997 Rhode Island Summer Invitational Writing Consortium, I felt like the exuberant character in Dr. Seuss' book. I had emerged from the "mixed-up," seesaw days of traditional methodology and process learning confident that my future years as an educator would turn out "all right." I knew that, in my classroom, learners would engage in an exciting process of discovery through reading ... and writing. I finally felt free from "the age of spectatorship," the dreary classrooms of student isolation and direct instruction that I fell into in my early years as a teacher (Bruner, 1963, p. 80). The consortium had reinforced my goals as an educator: to provide the environment, the stimulation, the encouragement, and the invitation to explore and discover. I was recommitted to my classroom as a place where students come with the same enthusiasm with which they run outside to play — minds overflowing with ideas, eyes laughing with excitement.

Back in 1968, I would have expressed my thoughts quite differently. Creativity, passion, discovery, and celebration were not part of my teaching vocabulary, just as "writing," though an integral part of literacy and learning, was hardly part of my first grade curriculum. Literacy filled a narrow space, one that was not very stimulating, not child-centered, and certainly not bursting with energy. It was a one-dimensional space, a void in which a child interacted with a reading textbook or a workbook in silence.

My classroom environment was very different from what it is today. For most of the day children were attached to their desks, which were evenly spaced in a tidy grid of rows and columns. "Subjects" were similarly ordered and unimposing, stored in neat columns on shelves. Social studies books were occasionally dusted as children read a chapter about "the community," "important people," or whatever was listed next in the table of contents. "Reading books," basal readers, came off the shelf at "reading time," when the children merged into homogeneous groups. Math books, colorfully illustrated, provided objects for counting and blank lines for inserting corresponding numbers. "Writing," hardly a subject at all, was a tool for repeatedly copying spelling words, filling in a "blank," or practicing letter formation. Subject followed subject, book followed book, sigh followed sigh. The classroom environment was isolating and very quiet.

When, toward the end of the year, I finally asked my first graders to compose sentences, usually to define a vocabulary word or answer a question about a story, I felt frustrated by their painful attempts at writing. Why was writing so difficult for children about to enter the second grade? Now I realize that these children could not explore written language when verbal expression was so sharply curtailed. Even thinking was critically limited by the "fill-in-the-blank" environment.

James Britton (1993) explains that we mentally store a "representation" of a classroom based upon our own experiences as students. I was modeling my classroom on the classroom I had known. In my school days, writing instruction was the traditional skill/drill approach. I completed workbook pages and worksheets, diagrammed sentences, learned the names of all the parts of speech, and practiced correct usage repetitively. Like the classrooms of my childhood, the classroom I constructed during my early years of teaching was a very rigid, subject-centered place which placed great emphasis on orderliness, memorization and perfection. Little thought was given to collaboration, discovery, and creativity.

But I remembered a high school English class I took that offered me a glimpse of the way things might be. The teacher assigned creative topics, and when students returned to class with their written pieces, several of us would hurry to read each other what we had written. Others would hover around to listen. We were sharing the clever ways we expressed ideas, competing with one another to be creative. The teacher usually busied herself near the windows or at her desk for about five minutes while this exchange continued, cleverly allowing us time for sharing. For those few minutes, we experienced the joy that comes when working in a community of writers. But in my early years as a teacher, I did not connect this way of learning with my classroom.

I was unaware, however, that a body of knowledge was developing about alternative approaches to teaching writing. In the summer of 1966, as I began my second year as an undergraduate student majoring in elementary education, some fifty educators, psychologists and sociologists from the United States and Great Britain met at Dartmouth College in New Hampshire. Their purpose was to discuss the teaching of English in elementary and secondary schools. It was the general consensus among the participants at this seminar that there was no general consensus about practices in English education. These delegates met, therefore, to discuss the many issues related to language, learning, and literacy. According to the accounts of this seminar, an interesting division emerged. Though the delegates generally agreed that reading, writing, speaking, and listening are functions of English, they disagreed on instructional methodology.

Much discourse evolved around the identification and achievement of specific goals in the teaching of English. The British educators strongly opposed the use of the word "instruction" and its connotation of "subject matter," "content," and "mastery of details," while the American educators persistently emphasized intellectual discipline, isolated subjects, correctness, and testing. Textbook learning that Geoffrey Summerfield referred to as "... disconnected, fragmentary, arbitrary, and abstract" describes a pedagogy that the British feared was detrimental to self-expression and student interest (Summerfield, 1968, p. 26).

Unfortunately, this stimulating debate was in its infancy when I was an undergraduate student majoring in elementary education. In fact, I don't recall learning about teaching writing at all. Meanwhile, theorists were debating concepts that I and most teachers were to become aware of only years later: language as expression vs. language as grammar, English as response to literature vs. English as knowledge of literature, education as experience vs. education as instruc-

tion, growth as a natural process vs. growth as instructed progress. These debates continue to this day.

At about this time, British theorists James Britton and John Dixon and American theorist James Moffett, among others, began writing about learning as a natural, expressive process that begins in early childhood and continues in school. According to Moffett, for example, writing is a way of extracting knowledge, of discovering and ordering one's thoughts. He recognized writing in this process as "an instrument of investigation and discovery." If these perceptions of writing exist, Moffett persisted, then "Writing is hauling in a long line from the depths to find out what things are strung on it" (1981, p.148).

But I graduated from college unfamiliar with Moffett's work. After several years of teaching, I began to question my use of traditional practices, but I didn't know of another way to teach writing. When I resorted to writing sentences on the board for children to copy, I sensed my students were not really learning. When I saw how hard they struggled alone, I wished I could help them. If I helped one child, the others still struggled. I had no concept of how to change all this.

Then in 1985 I met professionals who advocated a new practice they called "process writing." I went to a workshop to learn how to use the "Write-to-Read" computer program, a methodology that included writing as part of reading instruction. Here I heard about "invented spelling" for primary students. I listened as the presenter suggested that first graders, in particular, can be easily overwhelmed with all of the subtasks involved with writing. She claimed that first graders could better express themselves if they were less concerned with grammatical conventions and correct spelling ... at least initially.

Yet I was skeptical of this new approach. In fact, I thought writing would be even more troublesome than before. I wondered how children would ever learn to write "correctly" if I allowed them to write "incorrectly."

I tried various compromises. I made corrections with a green pen rather than a red one. For a while, I wrote a sentence correctly under a child's sentence. I thought if students saw the correct sentence, they would write better. I even tried correcting their sentences on the computer while they watched and listened. But I soon concluded that the green pen was no different from the red pen, writing the sentence correctly under their sentence brought no significant change in their work, and that all the grammatical changes were my corrections, not theirs.

Some of my students also clung to old habits. They wanted, for instance, to know how to spell every word in their stories before they wrote. Even when children "sounded it out," some still asked, "Is that right?" But given the level of spelling knowledge of the typical first grader, I could easily have become a walking dictionary, and students still would not write fluently.

But over time I discovered strategies that did help children write more fluently and look at writing, particularly their writing, more critically. I identified children's errors and highlighted needed skills in daily mini-lessons. By teaching and reteaching word families, short and long vowel sounds, word endings, base words, contractions, compound words, etc., I reinforced phonetic and grammatical concepts that I had previously taught using workbooks and worksheets. We also collaboratively developed a list of high frequency words, which we called "writer's words" (not "sight words"), and posted them in our classroom.

In another attempt to strengthen writing skills, I developed a revision activity. After copying a child's sentence on the board, reproducing the identical grammar, spelling, punctuation, capitalization ... even letter formation, I facilitated a contextual discussion in which all children analyzed and shared their ideas about this piece of writing. We discussed primarily grammatical conventions, and we made revisions together. These strategies became frequent activities in my classroom.

The children began to think about their errors as "... the place where education begins" (Rose, 1989, p. 189). They realized that we would think about all the grammatical details later ... together. As they gained confidence in their ability to express their ideas, they began to write more fluently than I could have imagined. When they occasionally asked me how to spell a word, I reminded them, "Just sound it out." Through writing, revising, peer editing and rewriting we became a true community of learners.

I experienced such success with the Write-to-Read program that I became open to examining other aspects of my curriculum. I learned that children's school day does not have to be strictly segmented into sub-

jects, but that thematic instruction can connect subjects like math, social studies, science and reading. Neighborhood libraries, with the technology to tap into other libraries, became my most valuable resource in integrated learning.

The first anthology in our particular reading series consisted of stories, poems, and songs about the farm. The children and I started by discussing their farm experiences and related topics. Sometimes we filled the blackboard with the names of farm animals; other times we discussed and wrote interesting ideas about the farm. We drew pictures of farm animals, we read books about the farm, we thought about other kinds of farms, we took a trip to a farm (snapping pictures and later writing captions), we made books in the shape of a farm, we wrote a class BIG book about the farm, we carved pumpkins, we made pumpkin bread, we sang songs. The farm and all of its related concepts evolved into a first grade curriculum of reading, writing, language, grammar, literature, spelling, math, art, music, and health. The children came to school each day ready to engage in meaningful integrated learning. We even traveled to the computer lab, farm activities in hand, to continue our learning on computers and at listening and activity centers.

Theme followed theme, each one opening new opportunities for learning. The children began to share their ideas spontaneously and to work grouped as teams, not in rows. We posted "writer's words," we learned to collaborate, we made our own library books and learned to "borrow," we took home bedtime stories to read to our families, and we called ourselves authors and illustrators. We learned to be friendly, considerate, polite, and, yes, responsible.

My classroom was no longer silent. My students and I sat together in a circle or on a rug to share our ideas, collaborate, and talk about sounds, words, and sentences. They read their stories aloud and shared their illustrations. I wrote some of their sentences on the board so we could talk about them together ... and change them. They talked to their friends about their work ... while they worked. I listen to children now. They show me where they need to start and I encourage them to start there and move forward.

As for writing, my students now wrote much more than mere sentences. My first graders composed stories, autobiographies and family albums and even wrote and illustrated books on some of our theme studies, such as Ireland, presidents, and insects.

As I watched the children become young authors and illustrators, I realized that teaching writing, once my biggest frustration, had become the most rewarding part of teaching first grade.

Sometimes I questioned my new classroom environment and learning procedures. I even questioned whether learning should be fun. I remember vividly one particular episode that caused me to critically examine my methods. It happened when our classroom inquiries and experiences led us to explore letter writing. Carelessly, I assumed that any other teacher would be pleasantly surprised to receive an invitation to write letters, especially to the eager young writers that I had prepared for this endeavor. Having discussed the concept of "pen pals" and the logical contents of a letter of introduction, I printed, on very large chart paper, a letter which the children dictated. We all signed our names and drew self-portraits to send to our new friends. Then we created a large envelope out of construction paper, addressed, self-addressed, and "stamped" it. As soon as we sent the envelope to another school, we anxiously awaited our reply. Within a couple of days, the envelope returned, along with our letter and self-portraits. Enclosed was a handwritten note from the teacher. She had listed all the subjects she had to teach in the course of the school day, then added, "I don't have time for this!"

Unprepared for this response, and still somewhat fragile in my newly adopted methodology, I considered my options. I decided to send the envelope to another teacher. This time, the reply was an enthusiastic acceptance of our invitation to "write." We soon became quite creative with our responses... Valentine's Day cards, Easter messages, even an invitation to visit. The children eventually wrote their own letters on computers, sent each other pictures, and even traveled by school bus to meet their pen pals for a picnic lunch, songs, and sharing. The "pen pal" activity encompassed all areas of learning and proved to be a highlight of our school year.

However, I sometimes thought about the rejected envelope and the comment that accompanied it. Though I persisted in my pursuit of meaningful learning experiences, I often wondered what it was that the other teacher thought she didn't have time for. More

importantly, I wondered how it was that *I* had time. Sometimes I wondered if we were spending too much time collaborating, reading our stories, and engaging in our work. I wondered if the children were learning enough rules and facts and if they would be ready for the demands of the next grade. I wondered if they would adjust to silence, independent work and decontextualized learning in some other year. I wondered if I was setting them up for disappointment later. I wondered and I wondered ... until I saw the enthusiasm and felt the excitement. I listened to the parents who told me their children wanted to come to school, even when they were sick. I heard the children ask at the end of day, "Is it already time to go home?" I looked at the pictures children drew of themselves, of their classmates, and of their teacher, and I saw the smiles on all the faces and the energy in every body. I wondered — for a moment — then I listened to the children's voices, I saw the enthusiasm in their eyes, and I continued to celebrate their accomplishments!

My conflict is not unique. Many teachers have faced the same dilemmas. In many classrooms, teachers read the manuals of the new reading programs and closed them in frustration. The old readers offered teachers security; the new program empowered learners. The old teacher's editions stated specifically what was to be taught, what examples to use, and what responses to elicit; the new manuals were vague. The old procedures pointed at correctness and details; the new methods valued expression and invented spelling. Confusion was compounded by the glaring contrasts between the different philosophies. The conflict was enormous. Some teachers tried to sort out the differences between the "old" and the "new" with the hope of resolution, while others, finding no solutions, remained "old school."

Perhaps because of these personal and professional conflicts, writing process methodologies put forth over thirty years ago are still not established in schools. While today many new teachers have been made aware of the claims of writing project advocates for social interaction, writing workshops, expressive language, whole language, invented spelling, and writing across the content areas, these remain controversial concepts. Many communities continue to order textbooks, and students persevere in isolation in many classrooms, writing only on occasion.

Why, so many years after Dartmouth, is the classroom not a studio for writers? In 1977, English teacher Mina Shaughnessy attributed the resistance of writing process pedagogy to, among other conditions, the historical perception of writing as formal, expository prose. These attitudes in colleges and universities influence writing instruction in the lower grades. This limited view has not allowed us to imagine writing as a way to nurture the natural development of the child. If we can expand our view of writing to include expressive writing, recreational writing, writing to learn, and even writing as a tool for communication and connection, we then become open to process methodologies that can result in more writing, more creative thinking, and more integrated and meaningful learning.

I no longer doubt the social, emotional, behavioral, and academic benefits of writing process approaches, although I continue to look for ways to improve my program. If outcome can be measured by progress, then children of all ability levels show significant growth. Process methods also encourage lifelong learning, since children take responsibility for their work.

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Creating Civility:
Dialogue Journals in Special Ed Classes

by

ELIZABETH ANDERSON

◆

For a number of years, I taught a group of middle schoolers variously described as "learning disabled," "borderline retarded," "behaviorally disordered," and "economically" or "culturally" deprived. In reality, these were catchall phrases, designed to encompass the range of kids who couldn't fit in anywhere else. Their one commonality, and the deciding factor in their placement, was extreme difficulty with school language — and, in particular, written language. Already excluded from most of the experiences of their peers, the inability to read served to further isolate these young people from the mainstream and provided adequate justification to describe them as disabled. Perceived disability then took precedence over all other aspects of their lives; by the time they reached my class, most of these students defined themselves as failures, disenfranchised members of a club whose bylaws they could not even begin to understand. This paper describes some of my attempts to bring them into the literate world — particularly through the exploration of journal writing.

My students' education generally reflected the behavioral approach to instruction which had been popular when I was earning my credential some twenty years before, and is still favored in many special education classes. It assumes that language can be reduced to subcomponents, to be taught in a systematic, linear fashion considered responsive to deficits identified in formal assessment. There is little or none of what Vygotsky describes as "the complex dialectical process characterized by periodicity, unevenness in the development of different functions, metamorphosis or qualitative transformation of one form into another, intertwining of external and internal factors, and adaptive processes" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 73) which accounts for ongoing development. Instead, instruction largely consists of rote drills in isolated skill areas.

Activities used to this end had included basal readers at a primary level (material which rubbed salt into already much inflamed wounds), programmed instruction, worksheets, and flash cards developed from sight word lists. Both on the explicit level (such as their Individual Educational Plan goals), and in the personal, often heartrending requests from parents and children alike, there was enormous pressure for my students to learn to read and for me to show them the way. At times, however, I felt I was participating in a con game where, in teaching children what I knew in my heart were splinter skills, I could maintain the pretense they were actually acquiring the abilities of a literate person. Neither prescriptive reading programs nor flash cards generalized into reading — they were boring for child and instructor alike, and isolated from relevant meaning making.

Erickson aptly describes the counterproductive nature of such instruction, which denies authentic interaction, scaffolding, and creativity. He wonders "whether such environments can possibly be arenas for the enactment of civility, or whether civility — mutual commitment to participation in society beyond the self — is impossible in such circumstances" (Erickson, 1984, p. 56). Such questions are of fundamental importance when one considers the battleground between teacher and child that many special day classes become — and how so many children who have difficulties with language are subsequently also described as behaviorally disordered.

It was in this search for "civility" that I entered a process of reconsidering my instructional strategies. I recognized the journals some of my students had begun as a useful part of the program. I'd been an inveterate journal-keeper from childhood, and was encouraging my young daughter to develop the habit — now I pushed journal use across the classroom. For all students, journals allow safe exploration of written language and represent a natural way to connect oral and written language and experience. As journal writing gives students a chance to write on any topic they choose, it allows the writer a subtle "buy-in" to the exercise. The writing was their own, so they were engaged. For my students, whose voices were too often silenced, journals also provided a valuable way to validate thoughts and feelings. Students were able to participate at different levels. Since nearly all the class began to write, I encouraged approximations of correct usage and spelling. I was doing everything I could to support a wide range of abilities. Some children dictated their journals, some children dictated and then copied into their own writing, and some wrote independently.

Journal writing became an enormously important part of the day. For Lisa, an isolated, physically aggressive and essentially nonverbal child, it was indispensable. Her morning could not continue until she had indicated from a long list who were her friends of the moment, and who was out of favor. Her writing provided her important connections to her classmates. Trevor also explored peer interactions:

I hat this kid at pe and I don't like him becuse he makes me mad and I hat him becasue he makes a fool of him self and I dont like him becuse he makes a suped face at me

as did Anna:

Yesterday I minded my own business. There was a boy and a girl kissing in the assembly. I was minding my business becasue I wouldn't talk about Gayle's problem. Gayle took Catherines watch and broke it.

Rae describes a weekend at home, in what reads as a poem to life in the projects:

I dint do noting this
Weekend.
The bathroom is messed
Up. The wall
Still leaks. Theres a cracked
Pipe in there. The toilet is
Loose. The screws are striped
The landlord
Hasnt come yet

Other students mull over the universal quandaries of adolescence:

My mother is screamin at me do case I talk smart to my mother becasue I don't want to do no work. Her holles at me really loud. Te whole neighborhood can hear it. I sturt crying.

—Tifny

Nottig is going on in my Life well. I just got of punishment. And I get all of my priveleges back bout wene I was on punishment I cnate do eney ding bout set up in my room and do my homework. And go to bed.

—Yvonne

My brother is a puck he got the last of the iescrem he wons to get his way

—Andrew

I dont like the principal
He says
I dont get to wear
Caps or wallet chans
I just made my chain
Shorter so he
Doesnt see it

—Alan

For some students, a more sophisticated exploration of feelings developed. Anna writes about moving on to high school:

I feel a little bit sad. I'm going to miss my classmates. The new class will be scary. There are some boys and no girls. Ive been in Elizabeht's class for 4 years. Thats a long time. I think about my old class. They said I was talking to the walls. I talk whene I want but now I do it inside my head. Elizabeth and I go fir walks and talk inside our heads togethr.

Continuing to look for ways to help my students develop their writing, I discovered the concept of dialogue journals at a summer program offered by the Bay Area Writing Project. Although there is very little research about the use of dialogue journals with chil-

dren such as mine, those described as severely handicapped, Staton (1985) explores journal writing with hearing impaired children, and there are some studies on the use of dialogue journals with children described as learning disabled. The concept seemed tailor-made for my class, providing, as Staton states, "...a concrete application of Vygotsky's theory of functional human activities occurring first through the learner's cooperative participation in accomplishing tasks with a more experienced partner" (1988, p. 199). In other words, it offered another way to scaffold student language in an authentic setting.

An important teacher goal was developing conversation open-ended enough to be responded to with more than a yes or a no, but not so complex that it overwhelmed the child's emergent language.

I introduced the process as a "Language Experience Activity" similar to the "Daily Journal" described by Strickland (1990). A class-generated journal was incorporated into our morning group time, with children participating actively in shared discussion, writing, and reading. The journal took the form of a poster on the wall which we left up and often added to during the day, providing a record of moments in student lives and, perhaps even more importantly, a public recognition and validation that they were kids with the experiences and desires of all their schoolmates:

Alan went to Rae's apartment yesterday. They went down to the church to catch lizards. Sean forgot he was meant to bring Elizabeth flowers. Trevor's dad gave him a haircut because Trevor hates the barber. Alan and Rae want to go to the show on a double date with Shaunda and Melisa. Karl went to the school dance on Friday. That took a lot of courage.

From here, my next step of extending written interaction to individual journals was a relatively easy one. Students took their journals home and wrote every night and I responded to them each morning. I found that both my students and I looked forward to what the other had to say. One of the most striking features of the writing is the attempt to make connections, share experiences, and offer support. This last, in particular, was a novelty for my students, most of whom had very little experience in being at the giving end of a relationship. However focused on everyday matters they may seem, the children's thoughts are certainly an entry into Erickson's arena of civility. Yvonne writes me, before my appointment for a long- dreaded root canal:

I hope you dont cry elizabeth wind you get shot in your mouth at Dennis dont be scare elizabeth dont be nervous

On another day, she warns me that her buddy is angry, and I should stay out of her way, but not take it personally:

Tiffiys dad got bete up in the steets. Askin for Money and then he went to the Hosebittle by the camebalalams. Titny very very oup site becose she was mad at the peple.

Entries rapidly turned into ongoing discussions, such as the one below, which continued for over a week. An important teacher goal was developing conversation open-ended enough to be responded to with more than a *yes* or a *no*, but not so complex that it overwhelmed the child's emergent language. I took as an example the model of language acquisition which begins so naturally between parent and child at birth, a carefully orchestrated dance in which the more skilled adult must learn to advance and then draw back, maintaining engagement yet guiding the child to independent expression, and I soon found myself well partnered. The following exchange could be considered particularly remarkable, since it involves an autistic young man who frequently demonstrated difficulty responding to any oral classroom conversation in an appropriate (topic centered or sequential) manner.

E: How is Lizzie (a pet iguana)? This afternoon we are going to East Bay Vivarium because my daughter wants a lizard. Have you ever been there?
J: No I have not been to that pet store. Lizzie is fine. My father buys her food at East Bay Vivarium. My father and I saw the Blue Angels from Pier 39 on Saturday.
E: We think E. Bay Vivarium is really neat. My daughter got two Anoles. They change color from green to brown. Tell me about the Blue Angels.
J: The Blue Angels were very exciting. What did you name your lizards?

E: Laura named them Silver *and* Gold *but I don't like those names. Any suggestions?*
J: I like the names George and Joyce for the lizards. But a name is just a name.

The joumals are also a search for common ground between teacher and child. In everyday details of living, we found considerable overlap, despite the presumed differences of our worlds:

T: Dear Elsbith My dad cooked a chicken and rice for dinner. What di you have for your dinner.
E: chicken and rice sounds good. I think we are going out tonight - do you like Mexican food?
T:I like Meicin food It is good it is read hot and it is spicy and I love it.
E: The spicy part is good. Do you like spicy Chinese food? We went to a Hunan restaurant in the end. (T's father is Chinese)
T: I love hot spicye chinese food, do you lkie chong pow chincken.

Or, in another exchange:

E: Do you all decorate your tree together - and do you have any special ornaments? I collect birds for my tree -p.s. I hope your sister is feeling better.
T: We are going to get our cris mas tree on December 14. We all decorate our tree together. Our ornaments are prite.
E: I think I'm getting my tree then too! This weekend Laura and I are baking cookies shaped like stars. Do you make any special holiday foods?
T: We cook stike rice and we cook ham bow and we have some buns and we make crismas cooke, and that is it! Tod ay was cumey.
E: What made today crummy, Trevor?
T: Now today was nice and the sun was out and the sky was just nice and I just love it, Love T.

Generalization of academic skills can be particularly difficult for disabled children, perhaps, in part, because of the unfortunate pattern of instruction discussed earlier in this paper. Therefore I was particularly happy when my students spontaneously began to extend their newfound control over writing into correspondence between classmates and, eventually, connections with the world outside the special day class. The implication was certainly that the method of our dialogue had been internalized, and was now being used without my immediate support, although I was still shown the letters! It was also useful for the students to feel that they could use appropriate communication methods — rather than acting out to get attention — and know that they would get a response:

Dear Principal
I want to talk to you. I want to have a dance party
And dance in frunt of the whole school on the stage
Dance until I die! I want
Rock and Roll
Sincerely your student
Andrew

Yvonne addresses another staff member:

To pe teacher Im very very sory four what I did at pe. I will particpate in pe. I will run my laps at pe, you is a very nice teacher. I will not right Love letters to boys a gain.

Finally, the death of a popular singer inspires Tifny to spend her bus ride on a letter to the editor:

To eldor: Way di biggie and Big pope get short? Avery body thot that 2pac was steal alive. Please plese plese tell me wie did they kill him my auntie sharee called and started crying.

In everyday details of living, my students and I found considerable overlap, despite the presumed differences of our worlds.

Although it is obvious that the initial focus of this writing was not on mechanics, correct punctuation and spelling were modeled in teacher responses and specifically taught in other parts of the writing program. It also needs to be remembered that very few of the teenagers came to the class with writing skills higher than what is considered to be a first- or second-grade level. I felt that we met the primary goal, which was to use writing to legitimize the students' voices, freeing them from the constraints of disability, as expressions of the tides of feelings felt by any adolescent. The creative exploration of writing was perhaps particularly important for these students. They were genuinely excited at being invited to enter the "lit-

eracy club." It was clear that we recognized each other as writers, and such inclusion was good.

I have files of student writing, memories of the years I taught. Among them is a note from a parent that I think of when I hear discussions about the etiology of learning disabilities. It serves as a good reminder of the importance of context in all our expectations of student ability and potential—and of the difficulties of changing from comfortable, familiar patterns:

> *Hi Elizabeth — This is Bob. Kristi is writing too much in her dialog (sic) notebook. She writes for hours (sometimes) and drives us crazy asking for spelled words, etc. Can we agree to limit this? We'd appreciate your help. Thanks!*

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Parallel Universes

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Some of my students try to fill the computer screen with their writing, and when they realize that the end of the page is not far ahead, they try to write to that point, too. As a few students lead the way, other children soon adopt similar goals. And as they improve their writing, they learn to listen to and respect one another and the community atmosphere that we share.

At the Rhode Island Summer Institute of the Writing Consortium, I was happy to meet other teachers who had undergone a similar transformation. I wonder, however, how much earlier we would have reached our current level of growth if the work of Britton, Moffett, and others had not been confined to a parallel but separate universe.

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In the Midst of Silence

by

KIMBERLY SLOAN

I go through two alarmed doors, my bag is checked, and finally I am allowed into a large room filled with young men, ages thirteen to eighteen. They are incarcerated in the Indiana facility. Some correctional officers stare out at the sixty-eight boys from behind a Plexiglas window, while others circle the room as the boys eat. One young officer folds his thick arms across his chest and paces back and forth. "Better hurry up there men. Too much talkin', not enough eatin'. This ain't no vacation. We got to keep to the schedule." He speaks to no one directly, but sends his deep voice across the crowd of inmates.

The boys are sitting at huge, wooden picnic tables. Many of them will remain sitting at them for the next four hours for school. I walk up to one of the boys and hand him a library book that I checked out for him. The room is full of chatter and energy. I begin to talk to the boy about the book when the correctional officer with the deep drawl shouts above the breakfast conversation: "DEAD MOUTH IT."

Most boys cringe at the booming command. Others go on eating, numb to the words. I walk away from the student I was talking to, knowing that he is not allowed to speak to me anymore. The room is hushed as the boys finish their meal. As I prepare for the day ahead, I think back to the enjoyable breakfast conversation my husband and I had that morning, and about the unnatural silence of sixty-eight teenage boys in one room. I wonder if my husband and I would be having this pleasant dialogue if we had spent our formative years in the midst of silence.

What Silence Brings

I realized, working at this instituton, that many of these boys' problems with the law are at root the result of poor communication skills. They cannot speak to adults, authority figures, or even peers without conflict. Both inside and outside the institution, they become embroiled in altercations because they cannot explain themselves well. What they mean to say is often misinterpreted by others. While in the facility, many inmates bottle up their feelings and their language in order to avoid conflict, and thus become practiced and professional at silence. They simply don't trust words, especially their own.

This atmosphere of control and silence is a very difficult one in which to learn the appropriate communication skills that are so crucial if these boys are to effectively manage life's conflicts. In fact, a stated goal of this institution is to rehabilitate these youths to become contributing members of society. Yet as the Dead Mouth order is shouted out, and the boys swallow their words along with their breakfast, they become increasingly expert at silence.

Finding a Voice

I had been teaching English at this facility as part of my graduate work at Indiana University. My goal became to break down this wall of silence, to help students grow as communicators through classroom discussions and interactions, through the use of literature, and especially through writing. But my students did not love English the way I did, and I was finding it difficult to motivate them. The educational model employed at the facility did not help.

The institution promoted what it called an "individualized curriculum" for each boy. At first this sounded practical to me: sixty-eight boys of varying abilities needed different levels of challenge and work. But, what the "individualized curriculum" translated into was a separate notebook for each boy that contained worksheets and more worksheets. The boys were to sit in silence for four hours a day and fill in the blanks in their schoolwork. They could raise a hand in order to ask a question of the teacher, but they were not to speak to one another in school. There were to be no

debates, no discussions, and certainly no open-ended writings where the boys could be "inappropriate." Some of the officers had confiscated writing assignments my students had written for my class because they were "inappropriate." Some boys were even punished for their writings.

An officer criticized my teaching of* Twelve Angry Men *because it, in his words, "stirred up too much stuff about race, law and crime."

I spoke to my professor, Hope Elkins, about these challenges to my teaching philosophy. I told her that I refused to employ the notebook curriculum, consequently enduring criticism by some of the officers. I recalled one specific occasion in my class when I was speaking about Shakespeare. I commented to the class that his plays are still relevant today because he wrote about basic human themes we can all still relate to. That is when I saw an officer tap a student on the shoulder, point at me, and then roll his eyes. When I asked the officer about this interaction later, he replied with a question, "How is Shakespeare important to these guys? They can't learn that stuff and it isn't important anyway."

On another occasion, a different officer criticized my teaching of *Twelve Angry Men* because it, in his words, "stirred up too much stuff about race, law and crime." He told me our enactment of the play was simply "too active and loud." During the reading of one of the scenes, this officer had yelled out the "Dead Mouth" command and the boys had to return to their seats in silence. To many of the officers, education in the facility should be about control. To me, education in the facility and anywhere else should be about freedom.

Dr. Elkins listened patiently as I voiced this clash of philosophy. Her solution: we would set up a weekly meeting with a small group of boys in the facility, one that would be less scrutinized by the officers. The boys would have a chance to communicate in a reading/writing workshop, and I would have a chance to find out if, with a smaller group, I could break through the silence and hostility.

Group One: Creating a Permeable Curriculum

The principal at the facility set up a table for us in the dorm. The gray walls and rows and rows of beds didn't look like a very friendly learning environment to me at first, but the principal informed me that there would be no officers monitoring our studies or my teaching during our once-a-week sessions. The principal "volunteered" two boys to the special program. He thought they were appropriate for the reading course because their test scores were particularly low in reading.

I met Brian and Anthony in the room that first day as they slouched in their seats, their arms crossed tightly against their chests. Brian had not done much in his English class since arriving at the institution six months ago. I had reluctantly read his file one day, hoping to find some way to reach him in class. I typically did not read students' files because I did not want to know what the boys had done to be there, thinking it might influence the way I treated them. I always found the files to be incomplete stories, and Brian's, which related he had stolen a car, was no different. Why did he steal the car? What was his home situation like? I tried to fill in the blanks, but all I really learned was that Brian was a tough case, something I already knew. He was difficult to talk to because he always had his dirty blonde hair in his eyes and would not often look at me. When he did look at me, it was always a shock to my system that caught me off-guard.

Brian's peer in this group was the fourteen-year-old Anthony. He was more willing in class, but I often struggled to read what he had written since he wrote phonetically. Anthony was quite social, he had a contagious wide smile, but he only hung out with the other African American boys in the facility. I wondered how he would interact with Brian in this group with none of his friends around. Yet I never looked in Anthony's file for clues. I didn't want to know why a boy his age would be incarcerated; I didn't want another partial story. All I did know was that it wasn't Anthony's first time in jail. He had been there a few times in his short life.

I began to tell the boys what we would be doing in the group. I told them we would each be reading a book of our own choice and writing stories on topics that interested us.

"Ain't nothing interesting about reading or writing as far as I can tell," Brian said, his chin pulled tightly to his chest.

"Well, I hope this group changes your mind about that," I said cheerfully.

"Why do we have to be in this stupid group anyway? What did we do to get extra school?" he complained as he flung his hair back. Now his blue eyes looked straight at me. The shock was effective.

"Yeah, how come us?" Anthony asked, sitting up in his seat.

It became suddenly clear to me how difficult this was going to be.

I tried to explain how I thought the boys would benefit. I tried to explain how this educational experience would be different. School often asked them to pretend to be something they were not. We wanted a curriculum that would allow them to be themselves, to find an overlap between school and their world. We felt the need to encourage student choice, to allow them to write about what mattered to them and to read what interested them. But, the boys sneered, why would anyone want to read or write at all? I felt momentarily deflated, but then decided to try a different tack.

"You like to talk, right Brian?"

"Yeah, talking's all right," he looked at me through the dirty blonde hair that covered his eyes.

"Yeah, I thought you did. You seem pretty good at it, too."

"Yeah," he agreed, his stern look had turned smug.

"Well, I suggest that we not read or write, but talk then."

"I'm cool with talking, Brian," Anthony chimed in suddenly, trying to break the tension.

"All right, we'll talk. What do ya wanna talk about," Brian asked suspiciously.

So we talked. The O.J. Simpson trial was going on and Brian seemed quite interested. He proclaimed O.J. guilty and we all debated the facts. It was not a surprise to me that Brian would be interested in the legal system and how it worked and didn't work; he had firsthand experience with that system. What surprised me was the way he was talking about the O.J. trial. He spoke with energy, talking about DNA testing and fingerprinting methodology. This discussion centered on something that Brian was familiar with: the courtroom. His "real" world was overlapping with the "fake" world of school. Maybe school could become more relevant. Maybe school could offer him a chance to investigate trials and courts and the very system that had placed him in this institution. That's when the light bulb went off for me. At the end of the session, I asked Brian if he ever read the newspaper about the trial. His surprising answer was yes. I suggested we start there. He agreed to bring in some newspaper articles for our next session.

We discussed trial issues and Brian kept returning to forensic matters. He had asked that we bring in books on the subject. He perused the old college texts that Dr. Elkins had found. He had bought into the group. But to the officers, this was "questionable" reading. They were not comfortable with Brian studying the tools officers use to convict criminals.

We wanted a curriculum that would allow them to be themselves, to find an overlap between school and their world. We felt the need to encourage student choice, to allow them to write about what mattered to them and to read what interested them.

Anthony had chosen the book *Makes Me Wanna Holler* by Nathan McCall, which also raised eyebrows with the authorities who were definitely uncomfortable with Anthony reading a book about a young African American's rage against white society. After watching the boys read these questionable books during their study and even free time, the officers complained to my principal, who fortunately supported my efforts.

In addition to being controversial, both books were difficult to read. Brian worked hard at understanding his book by writing down notes, page numbers of problem areas and vocabulary he did not understand

to discuss with me later. This was not an assignment or even a suggestion; he did this because it suited his own needs as a reader. Perhaps for the first time in his high school career, Brian simply wanted to *know*.

Anthony was reading at the fourth grade level, so his book selection created quite a challenge. He turned to one of his best friends, an older student who was not in our reading group. Although this young man would often refuse to do his classroom assignments, when Anthony told him about some of the plot of the book, the young man volunteered to help, reading and talking even during the television hour. When I asked Anthony what they talked about at night, he told me that they discussed how their neighborhoods in Indianapolis were similar to that of the main character in the book. The relevance of the material was key to their motivation and effort.

We had gotten them reading. And we were still talking. Now, how could we get them writing?

Dr. Elkins suggested that Brian and Anthony keep special interest scrapbooks. We spent one session making individual books out of contact paper. Brian chose to create a scrapbook on alternative music and he wrote down lyrics and clipped pictures from music magazines his family and I brought him. He showed me each new addition immediately.

I found Anthony's scrapbook particularly fascinating. It started out to be about basketball, but soon there were short biographies of famous African Americans in the scrapbook (Maya Angelou, Martin Luther King, Jr.). He had researched these on his own using the facility's encyclopedias. The first entry in the book was the poem "Dream Variations" by Langston Hughes. Anthony had added a page to the front of his scrapbook so that the poem would be first. Hughes' words: "To fling my arms wide / In some place of the sun" began this young man's prison scrapbook. When I asked him about the changes to his scrapbook he told me he wanted something that "would get him going." When I named it a motivational scrapbook, he said that was a good name because "I sure don't want to be here (prison) again." Words were beginning to be linked to action for Anthony. Poetry, biographies, words of all kinds were connecting him to the outside world he felt apart from. He even kept a piece he had titled "My Plan" in the book. It stated:

My plan is when I get out im going back to work with my grandfather, and stay out of the streets so much. i plan on going back to school for my mother and for my self. Because if any thing else thats all she would want from me is to go to school. And I wanna take good care of my baby, too.

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I did not know before this that the fourteen-year-old boy was a father. My jaw must have been hanging open when I read the plan because I remember Anthony asking me, "What is it?" I told him that I didn't realize he was a dad. "You never asked me," he responded. I congratulated him on the fine plan and for recognizing that getting an education could help him take care of a family better. He flashed me his bright, contagious smile. To my surprise, Anthony gave me the scrapbook when he was released so that I "would remember him." How could I forget?

As another way of moving the boys from speech to writing, we introduced dialogue journals, which soon became a place where the boys wrote about other interests and concerns, not just about our group. One time, for example, both Anthony and Brian wrote to us that they thought that we should have been allowed to meet in our group even though they were on "lock down." Some marijuana and pipes had been found in the dorm and the principal didn't think it was a good idea for us to meet in our group, or to do anything "unusual" since the boys were upset. What Anthony and Brian were upset about was missing our group. This is what Anthony wrote to me:

its so stoopid. i like when we meet in the dorm. we get to be us back there with nobody watching us all the time. we dont do nothing wrong back there. the officers are mad at me anyway cause in the search they found 100 D.O.C. pencils in my locker. i don't even

know why i did it i dont know why i took thm all. my daughter is getting to visit me friday could you stay for visitin so you can meet her?

When their social worlds were allowed into the curriculum, the boys wrote and read for their own purposes. In fact, there was no way to separate out their "real" lives from their school lives.

We moved from the dialogue journals into working in an authoring circle. We wrote and revised a story inspired by a scene chosen from a magazine. Anthony chose a picture of two kids playing basketball, graffiti-covered walls towering behind them. Anthony seemed instinctively to have been drawn to this picture by the adage, "Write what you know." He wrote about two young men who lose their money to a hustler on the streets of a city. The two youths play "three ball monty," a game where a ball is hidden under one of three cups and the players have to guess which cup it is under after the hustler moves everything all around. The main character in the story sees the guy running the game do "his switch and flip move" and catches him doing the "slip of the sleeve" trick. The piece had a flow to it. Anthony's voice clearly reflected the world that he knew — the city, a place of games, crime and action. I can still see him, reading his story to our group and tracing the round pale bullet scar on his arm with his fingers.

Brian, by contrast, chose a picture of a small cabin that was covered in multicolored Christmas lights There were huge snow-capped mountains in the background and the cabin was dwarfed by the scenery. Brian wrote a happy story about a family spending Christmas in the mountains together. There was really no conflict in the piece. It simply described the perfect holiday, the perfect family. The father in the story was especially strong. This was a story of what he never had, and a story of what he wanted to have someday. Anthony was writing about what he lived; Brian was writing about how he *wanted* to live.

After a few shy sessions, the boys who initially claimed to hate writing now worked diligently, even giving each other good feedback. For example, Brian told Anthony that he should add some description of the setting to his story so people who had never been to a city might "get a feel for the place." Anthony told Brian that he liked his mountain setting, but he thought that "something should happen to make it seem more real. No family's that happy." Brian was talking about sensory imagery and setting details, while Anthony was talking and plot and conflict and tension in writing. They were slowly becoming writers because they were a part of a writing community. It was the interaction that made the writing important. There was no Dead Mouth in that dorm room. We were rarely silent.

Hope Elkins and I also wrote, putting our stories out for the boys' comments. It took time, but the boys became comfortable giving us feedback. I remember Brian holding his long hair back away from his eyes as he looked over my story. His look was intent as he placed stars in the margin when he found a section he liked.

"Mrs. Sloan, do you really think he'd say that? I don't think he's got the guts to yell at his mom that way. What if you put something in earlier in the story so it's not so much a shock that he's doing all that."

"Yeah, I agree with Brian," Anthony chimed in. "I just don't see him actin' all bad like that. Maybe you could have him go under a spell or something that makes him act not like himself if you want him to be all mad and stuff. "

The students were my audience now. They became more comfortable giving the teachers feedback about our writing because they came to understand that they were responding not as students to a teacher but as readers to a writer. This give and take in the midst of silence had helped the boys become more confident learners They were finally beginning to believe in their abilities, believe in their voices. On Brian's last day he told me, "Don't worry, I'll finish my story. You tricked me, but I guess I'm a writer now. I'll keep writing, if you keep teaching." It was a deal.

Group Two: Hope and Voice

Brian and Anthony had talked about the reading/writing group with their peers. So, when we asked for volunteers for a new group when our first two students were released, we were overwhelmed by the response. Almost everyone wanted to be in the group. Five boys were chosen by the facility director and the principal and were told it was a "privilege. " The second group of boys came ready and willing to talk, read, and write. They had heard from Brian and Anthony that the writing group was fun. One student said he had heard that in the

group "you got to write what you wanted to — not like in school. "

Two of the five boys were African American and the other three were Caucasian. Three were tenth graders and there was also a sixth grader and an eighth grader. We could tell from the beginning that these boys had established an agenda for the group. Joe told us so in our first session.

"Well, Mrs. Sloan, the truth is, what we want to write is poetry that will impress our girlfriends," he said with a big grin. The rest of the boys replied with laughter and affirmations. There were high fives all around. We promised that we would bring in volumes of poems for the next session and would get them writing soon.

Although we read and responded to poetry by established writers and shared different poetry writing , it didn't take long for these students to start bringing in poetry they had written on their own. They were writing voraciously, bringing in several poems a week. However, all of the poetry they brought to our group was what they called "love poetry" and all of it rhymed. Yes, they were writing about what they knew and about what they cared, but we wanted to expand their idea of poetry.

We suggested to the boys that we use an authoring circle to get feedback from their peers and teachers on how to make their writing better, and the students quickly agreed. We knew we would have to model our own poetry and bring up discussions about topic, tone, imagery, and other poetic devices as we became a more cohesive group. We also knew that hearing "constructive criticism" about their poetry was going to be a little scary for the boys and we set out to make the group as comfortable as we could.

Unfortunately, at least from a teacher's perspective, it was not long before our group of five boys diminished to two due to releases and transfers. David and John were the two who remained. David was a seventeen-year-old tenth grader reading and writing on about the seventh grade level. John was a tenth grader and was on the appropriate reading level for his age. I never read their files to see what they had done to be incarcerated and David never did tell me. John was quite talkative and told us during the first session that he had sold drugs at his school. In addition to selling, he had a drug addiction of his own and was using the time in prison to try to break the physical addiction to cocaine. Both students were relieved when the writing group became smaller.

"Now we can really work seriously on our poetry. We'll have more time now," David smiled.

And serious they were. They both came prepared with new poems and revised poems for each session, taking notes as the other read his works aloud. John kept his poems in a special black three-ring binder. He would carefully write and rewrite and mark each paper with a draft number. David was less worried about organization. Much of his writing was on napkins and other scraps of paper. Both boys were open to suggestions for their writing from the start. For some time, they had little to say about our writing, but eventually, they were not the least bit shy about giving feedback to their instructors. That was when we knew we had created a safe place for them to write and to be heard. One day, John just couldn't contain himself anymore. "I just don't get that line!" he told me. "What do you mean that the 'colors squawk like seagulls?'" David chimed in immediately. Finally, I thought, now we are a literary community.

The students had now moved beyond their love poetry and were writing about real personal experiences. The day David knew he had a final revision of his poem "The Box," he burst into the dorm and placed a neatly hand-printed copy for each of us on our table.

"I did it! I took all of your suggestions and my pen and my brain and I did it! You're gonna love it," his blue eyes darted from one face to another to read a reaction. Then, with pride in his voice, he began to read. The poem was about a young boy's imagination and how it could turn a simple cardboard box into anything: a spaceship, a cozy house, a jet, a train, a boat, or

Then again, it could be a little car,
To get me out of this house when things get hard.
I can drive it to Disneyland or to the white beach's sands.
I can get away from my mom's hitting, cruel hands.

David had allowed his social world to converge with the world of school. He shared his box and all of the

pretend places or things that it could be in order to escape an abusive mother. He shared poems about a childhood lost and an unsure future.

John wrote about various topics. He wrote about the benefits of being poor with a family over being rich and alone. He also wrote about the horrors of cocaine addiction, something he had battled with himself. In a riddle poem called "Who Am I," the last two stanzas speak of John's own addiction:

I began costing you more and more,
So you stole from people when you couldn't afford.
I ripped you apart from the inside out; I was in control, without a doubt.
I made you do the most horrible things,
You were my puppet, and I pulled the strings.
Your body was dead, and I was your brain,
But you had to keep going though you knew it was insane.

It all ended in one last breath.
I became your life and the cause of your death.
If you don't already know, I'll tell you my name.
My first is Co, and the last name is Cain.

Both boys had come a long way since the first "love poems" they had brought in to the group. They wrote poems on a variety of topics and in a variety of styles. They both preferred using rhyme, but they had experimented with free verse as well. The had learned about poetic devices and about audience and tone. But, more importantly, they had allowed their lives into school and school into their lives.

The Voice Speaks Out

I was both nervous and excited when Dr. Elkins suggested we present our experiences at a reading conference at Indiana University. Yet I was certain that the educators attending the conference would be interested in the correctional setting that I worked in and the methods we had used. On the day of the conference, I immediately noticed that the room I would be speaking in was bright and colorful. It was a contrast to my usual gray surroundings at the facility. The room was full of busy chatter as teachers and other professionals waited for me to move to the front of the room. The noise suddenly stopped when I went to the podium. It was as if I had given the Dead Mouth command to this group, but there were no alarms and no resistant scowls staring back at me. The group smiled and looked welcoming, and I felt my anxiety level go down quickly.

I stood before the audience and presented the information above about the correctional mentality, the silence, and the workshop's methodology. But the real stars of the show were David and John who had brought their poems to the college campus to read to the teachers and administrators. The boys had been amazed when I had been able to get permission for them to attend the conference. They were nervous about the adult audience who would be listening to their poems. They were equally nervous about the correctional officer at the back of the room with a radio strapped to his belt and his arms crossed tightly against his chest.

Yet they stood before that silent, intimidating audience after I finished speaking and in small voices began to read their poems. As the applause grew from the audience, so did the boys' confidence. Their voices became clearer and louder as they read each of their pieces. They smiled when the audience applauded and congratulated them. The boys answered questions about being incarcerated, about their writing process and how they got their ideas. Mostly, they communicated appropriately and smiled a lot.

After the presentation, several people crowded around the boys to ask them more questions. David shouted across the room to me, "Mrs. Sloan, Mrs. Sloan! I've got business cards!"

And here was David, standing with a large group of professionals around him, his hand clasping business cards from editors who wanted him to send them his work. His eyes were as wide as his smile as he held the publishers' business cards above his head for me to see.

His smile said much to me, but it was the strength of his voice that said so much more.

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Kimberly Sloan is a teacher consultant of the Northern Virginia Writing Project. She currently teaches math and English at a mental health adolescent day treatment program for Fairfax County Public Alternative Schools.

Book Review

John Dewey and the Challenge of Classroom Practice

by Stephen M. Fishman and Lucille McCarthy

New York, NY
Teacher's College Press, 1998.
219 pages

◆

reviewed by
Dixie Dellinger

Dixie Dellinger is a teacher consultant of the University of North Carolina, Charlotte, Writing Project. Both she and Steve Fishman were members of OURTOWN: Johnny and Teachers Learning How to Learn Together through Writing, from Grade School to Grad School, *a 1985 national presentation in which ten local writing project teachers and UNC Charlotte professors reflected on issues of teaching and learning and their common history within the writing project. Dixie lives in Cherryville and teaches at Burns High School, Cleveland County.*

Q. How many teachers can dance on the horns of the same dilemma?

A. Just about all of them.

Since the "permissive" sixties brought back the cry of "relevance" — once thought to be buried with the "progressive" education preached early in the century by John Dewey — teachers have been struggling with what I believe to be a core teaching question: how much curriculum and how much student interest? That is, how much of what I do should pass along the Wisdom of the Ages, and how much should connect to the students' personal lives and milieu? If learning does not connect to students personally, they will have merely passed through school unaffected by the facts and concepts that make up the curriculum. But if the focus is entirely on their personal lives and environment, they will end up navel-staring and their lives will grow smaller rather than larger. The tensions between teaching one's subject and teaching one's students underlie every course outline and lesson plan we create.

A new book, *John Dewey and the Challenge of Classroom Practice*, by philosophy professor Stephen M. Fishman of the University of North Carolina, Charlotte and composition and literature professor Lucille McCarthy of the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, takes on the challenge of putting Dewey's theories of education for real life into actual practice with students in an introductory college philosophy class. Fishman and McCarthy have worked together for several years, have published a number of classroom studies in several journals, and have won the prestigious James N. Britton award for inquiry in the English language arts. In this book, Fishman's role is teacher, and McCarthy's role is outside researcher, devising methods of inquiry and analysis to help Fishman look at his own classroom. The authors alternate sections, then write a joint conclusion .

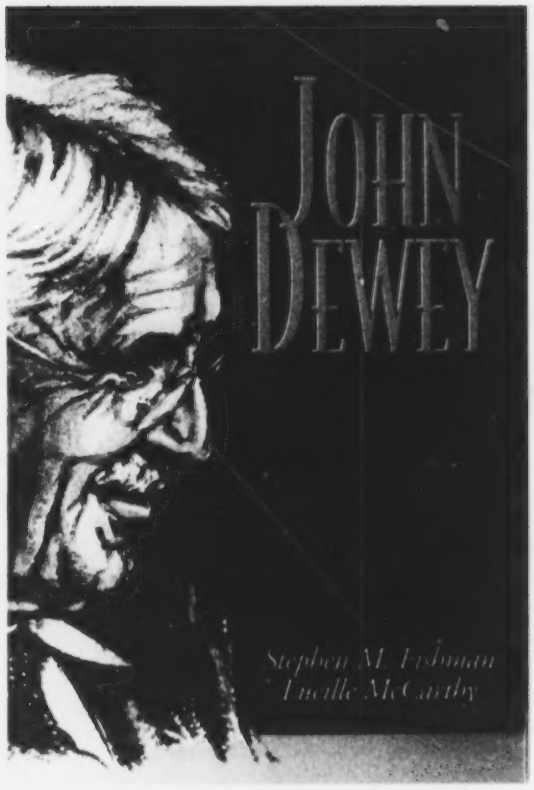
Fishman and McCarthy's book is important on a more than one level. First, it the clearest explanation I have encountered of the ideas of John Dewey, and beyond that the book also allows readers to participate vicariously in a great teacher's life with his students. Teachers trying to work through the "relevance dilemma" will find themselves in good company.

Having known Steve Fishman for some of the years he has struggled with this problem, and having struggled with it myself for almost as long, I was drawn into this book and — literally — could not put it down. I started it in the post-Christmas doldrums, isolat-

ing myself from family so that I could tangle with the (I thought) muddled theories of Dewey once again. Finding instead the chapters on Dewey's theory to be clear and vibrant when filtered through Fishman's mind and voice, and utterly swept up by the narratives of his own educational and teaching miasmas, I was soon reading through New Year's Eve, skipping the ball drop in Times Square on television and even the Cherryville New Year's Shooters down the street.

Part One explains, in terms of "nested dualisms," John Dewey's complex educational philosophy. Fishman presents it as a yin/yang of chicken/egg recursive processes focused on the goal of student growth — growth of the whole person: cognitive, emotional, and ethical. This goal underlies all that Dewey said and did, and it underlies all that Fishman says and does as a professor of philosophy and as a teacher. Central to that goal is one of those "nested dualisms" or oppositions, which I am calling the central dilemma of education and to which Fishman has applied his attention: the curriculum vs. student interest dualism. Having pursued the same goal and grappled with the same dualism in high school English classes for almost as many years as Fishman has in college philosophy classes, I plunged into Part Two, which Fishman and McCarthy entitle "Deweyan Classroom Experiments." Here theory and practice connect.

In these chapters, Fishman explores how the student vs. curriculum problem emerged in his own early life as a student and in the lives of his students. Fishman had already recounted how, following a life-changing experience at a Writing Project retreat in 1983, he had worked for several years with free, personal writing as a central pedagogical technique, focusing more on students' personal lives and interests than on formal, direct instruction in philosophy, hoping to engage students with philosophy through their own life concerns. However, even though student interest and engagement were high, he had become discontent with that approach because he "..began discovering that, as Dewey warned, student self-expression is not the be-all and end-all of education ... the readings — the sources of new subject matter — just were not seen as important" (p. 78). [A student] "pointed out in his journal that, since class conversation was more vigorous when I gave up attempts to discuss assigned texts, the obvious solution was to eliminate these readings altogether. At that moment, I decided to change..." (p. 86).



So, in reaction, he reverted to some of his earlier techniques — teaching techniques more like his own professors had used — emphasizing curriculum, assigning rigorous texts, all the while continuing to encourage free and open student writing and classroom discussion and trying to tie the ideas of the great philosophers to the students' own lives and questions. But he found that student essays were no more grounded in the philosophic subject matter of the course than they had been when he focused less on "curriculum." He was not seeing the integration between personal lives and curriculum that he wanted. But by focusing on curriculum, he lost student interest and engagement. Fishman had danced *on* the horns but not between them, and he was not content. He says, "It was time to examine my pedagogy again" (p. 88).

Analyzing his quandary in Deweyan terms, he concluded that in neither previous mode had he effectively integrated his

students and his discipline but had alternated between the two. He decided that he needed to pay more attention to the dualisms of classroom activities: "teaching and studenting, questioning and answering, homework and class work, students and their classmates" (p. 93). At that point Fishman began an experiment, outlined in Part Two, which Fishman calls "teaching for disciplinary integration" (p. 90) and "teaching by *in*direction" (p. 92).

Believing that his previous attempts to integrate curriculum and student interest had not succeeded because he had gone at it directly, Fishman worked on how to teach *in*directly. To do this, he instituted a modification of an idea from Art Young: student letter exchanges in which they explained their understanding of a reading and set out questions about what they found puzzling in it, to which another student would respond. In addition, he set up small groups to develop text-based questions, exchange with other groups, and generate answers. He audio-taped his responses to students' drafts of their essays, and required that homework be brought in typed so that it could be exchanged for cooperative interactions between students and their classmates (pp. 94-96). (In the appendix of the book Fishman provides detailed descriptions of these techniques, and of assigned writings.)

Since Fishman is also the researcher into his own practice, the book's two parts do not divide neatly into theory and practice at all but are a recursive yin/yang, a Deweyan book about Deweyan practice. But Fishman steps aside at the beginning of Part Two for Lucille McCarthy to outline the qualitative research methods they used to analyze what happened in Fishman's classroom as he attempted once again to resolve the dilemma and to report on the findings. They used qualitative research, as McCarthy says, ".. the type of social scientific methodology Dewey himself believes most appropriate for studying progressive classrooms" (p. 99). Their questions were: "Did [Fishman] succeed in helping his students connect philosophic subject matter to their personal lives? If so, what did this expansion of interest and integration look like, and what were its consequences for students?" (p. 107).

How much of what I do should pass along the Wisdom of the Ages, and how much should connect to the students' personal lives and milieu?

The data collection methods used were threefold: from the teacher, a reflection log, interviews, taped responses to student drafts, and audio-taped teacher-student conferences about papers; from the students, reflection logs, interviews both during and after the semester, "think-aloud" tapes, and student writing; and from the outside researcher, class observations and observations of teacher-student evaluation sessions (pp. 110 - 112). Data analysis procedures constructed themes and patterns by transcribing audio tapes, refining analytic categories, and composing drafts which reduced the raw data (p. 113).

The working and writing partnership between the two authors is close; it, too, is a kind of "nested dualism," a seamless weave of personal narrative and scholarly erudition. While Fishman experiments with teaching techniques, and McCarthy devises research methodology to probe the results of his work, McCarthy says, "We ... engaged in a complex theory-practice dialogue" (p. 113).

The final four chapters of the book report the findings. By focusing in detail on five students from the class, in these chapters McCarthy and Fishman are able to shine a clear light on what we might look for in such an inquiry. As one might expect in such a complex and subtle undertaking — seeking to identify when, where, how, and whether students integrated philosophic study with their own lives — there were successes and failures and a range between.

Probably the authors' most important effort though, is the attempt to assess what Dewey called "residues" or dispositions toward future learning, and there Fishman's experiment shows a solid base of success. As McCarthy says, "The test of Fishman's class ... is its ability to generate student habits which promote enriched experience or continued learning and growth" (p. 182). Four dispositions which Dewey considered necessary for intelligent thinking and ongoing education are: open-mindedness and careful listening, self-discipline and initiative, intellectual

responsibility, and courage. Fishman's students "left his class having practiced these habits" (p. 188).

In their conclusion, Fishman and McCarthy point out Dewey's relevance to contemporary education: to the present educational climate of debate over schools, what they do and how, to teacher development, and to student learning through indirect teaching.

This book, although about a college class, is applicable to all teachers of all students, reminding us of what education really is, encouraging us that we can still choose *what* to teach and *how* to teach it, even though the brain-bashing we get over test scores encourages us not to believe this. We complain that "they won't let me," but this isn't really true. We have the freedom to grapple with the same dilemma that Steve Fishman has, which is also our dilemma. And we can and must become our own researchers in our own classrooms in order to make any real change.

This is a practical book, but it is not a book of pat formulas. Rather it makes its points by probing to the heart of teaching and learning. Fishman, like other teachers, longs to see immediate growth in his students, but he knows too that what we call "education" is a lifelong process with long-range results, and no research methods can capture exactly what is going on in a classroom or say much about how these experiences will affect students. Only our students' lives, stretching out into the future, will tell the final tale.

Yet, it is wonderful to participate so deeply in the thoughts of a great and deeply caring teacher as he grapples with his teaching concerns, his work aided by a wise and skillful colleague. We all would want to be able to put our lives between covers — to let others know why we have lived, and what we have done with our minds on this earth. This book holds Fishman's life. I love it for that. I believe John Dewey would love it, too.

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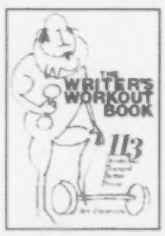

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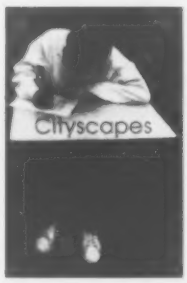

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The Quarterly
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Happy Problems

by

KIM STAFFORD

◆

Most of a writer's difficulties are what my father used to call "happy problems." When we would come to him in anguish, lamenting some difficult decision that loomed before us, he would respond, "Poor kid — you've got happy problems." This meant all our choices were good ones, and our anguish lay in our inability to see this.

An early version of this conversation (when I was ten) might go like this:

"Daddy, I really want to just go down in the woods and make a fort, but Pat says his dad wants to take us swimming, and we don't get to go very often. What should I do?"

"You poor kid," he said. "You've got happy problems. Don't worry, you'll figure it out."

A later version (when I was 39, and passing through a divorce) went like this:

"Daddy, I know I'll meet other women, but it won't be right, and that will be hard, and they'll be unhappy, and I'll keep searching."

"It sounds great," he said.

And it was, and it wasn't. Happy problems.

The point for a writer is not to brush away difficulty, Pollyanna style, with some thin, good hope. The point is to embrace the whole opportunity of writing, and say, like the Friar in *Romeo and Juliet*, in the midst of great distress, "There art thou happy ... there art thou happy." Writing is difficult work, but it is your privilege to have the treasure of the language ready. There art thou happy. True originality is elusive, but no one experiences the world quite as you do. There art thou happy. No one can really help you, but this isolation will make bold the best of your quiet self. There art thou happy.

For a writer, happy problems reside in the lucky hardship of finding ways to do what no one has ever done. To be original, one must embrace happy problems: all this feeling, all this memory, all these ways I could say what I almost know.

If you go into the material as yourself, you will find an original way.

The Happy Problem of Originality

It gives me uncommon joy to come across rich originality in an unexpected place, like this single, Shakespearean sentence in the *Audubon Society Field Guide to North American Wildflowers*, by Richard Spellenberg (Knopf, 1979):

> *After the summer heat dries the low mountains, driving most wildflowers to seed and browning the grasses, Red Shrubby Penstemon begins to flower, providing a final source of nectar before the hummingbirds must seek food higher in the cooler mountains or, if late in the season, migrate south.*

Can facts ever be original? Alone, no. But a new connection among a constellation of dispersed facts is always original. There lies the pleasure of discovery and creation.

You and I have felt the despairing sense that everything has already been said. Then comes the moment when you realize the very abundance of precedent is just one of many muses. If you go into the material as yourself, you will find an original way. Haven't we all heard that derivative, but highly original country song:

> *Blame it on your lyin', cheatin', old dead-beatin', two-timin', double-dealin', mean mistreatin', lovin' heart...*

Once that line is before us, we realize it waited a long time to be discovered. It took an omnivorous look at old materials for a writer unafraid to create a completely new song.

When you set out to create a fictional world, your most startling effects may be the rearrangement of known elements. I take my cue from the news. If I were making not a story or poem, but a new nation, how could I be most original? I want to be as creative as officials from Abkhazia, a break-away former Soviet republic: as one of their first official acts, leaders of the new nation printed a postage stamp filled with the grinning faces of "Marx" and "Lenin" — in this case Groucho Marx and John Lennon. In one stroke, despite their great difficulties ahead, these pioneers expressed a break with history, a love of art, a tie to the West, and a sense of humor. This makes me wonder what moves in my own writing could catch that kind of verve and crazy originality.

We are talking about improvisation here — knowing an old tune (Marx and Lenin), but not quite playing it as it has been played before — at all. In some ways, the more familiar the material, the more stunning your creative shift may be. A friend writes me to describe a Cherokee game called "Flip the Coined Phrase." It seems that part of Cherokee culture is pleasure in linguistic stunts, a game of verbal gymnastics — conducted both with close friends and ardent enemies. The game goes like this: start with a common phrase, and begin to juggle the words in all ways. The cliché "Talk is cheap" soon becomes "Talk is cheap, but good conversation is priceless." Or "Talk is cheap, until you dial long distance." You might begin with, "I love you," and travel past "Why do I love you," to "How do I love thee, let me count the ways," and "It's a miracle I still love you," and "It's a wonder I love you despite you faults," to arrive finally at "The wonder is not that I love you despite your faults; the miracle is that I love you despite my faults."

The writer says something new by listening to the cliché as if listening to a "problem student": somewhere inside that soul lies great wisdom. How to tease it forth? The poet Charles Simic once wrote, "The dream of every honest cliché is to enter a great poem." Yes. The happiness of this process makes me giddy. I want to say to the language: Give me your tired, your stale, your deadened words yearning to breathe free, and I will make them citizens in the new land.

Like a discouraged writer, a teacher might have the feeling that everything has already been taught. But even here lies a bonus. Going to class, meeting a new group of students, I need to be totally original by

making the most of all my most recent learning. And I need every member of the class to help.

Coming into class, I might begin, "Hey, you all, I just overheard Christy say and did anyone see that line of graffiti outside? and by the way, what have you been reading? has anyone written something recently that puzzled them? listen to this letter I just received, it occurred to me, what did you notice on your way to class? who is stuck on a piece of writing? Really? Let's talk about that."

I find with these questions and oblique nudges that my teaching reflects my experience as a writer. New ideas do not come from nowhere. Rather, a trigger in recent and seemingly ordinary experience may spark a train of original ideas as if from nowhere. The search for originality is not a struggle but a realm of play. As Oscar Wilde said, "Life is too important to be taken seriously." Time is short, the stakes are high, and our only option is spirited and playful exploration. As a writer, I find myself faced often by this lucky desperation: in a busy day, with only five minutes to write, what's fresh in my notebook, most new and strange? The writing of an essay on my life journey through music began with a piece of graffiti a student first reported:

To do is to be.
—Camus

To be is to do.
—Sartre

Do be do be do.
—Sinatra

The Happy Problem of Secrecy

Some things are too private to tell. Some of our best stories are family secrets. We might hurt others by telling them, we say. It's not our place to reveal them, we say. And yet secrets are also what we long to tell. It seems to me that we should write secrets we are *ready* to tell. If our stories are not in some way secret, they are not very interesting. And if they are secrets we are not yet ready to tell, we shouldn't tell them. But the boundary seems to shift daily between secrets we are not and secrets we are ready to tell. Yesterday, this was too private. Today, it's ready. Tomorrow, it may seem ordinary.

My father wrote every day for some fifty years. And yet, a month before he died, I asked him some tough questions, and he told me things I don't believe he had ever told anyone. And I haven't found them in his writings. Though he seemed in good health that summer of 1993, for some reason I was moved to sit down with my father and grill him: "What ever happened to your father? What was it like when you came back home, a pacifist, after The War? And what about your mother -- how was it for her after your father died?"

"She'd been left at the Poor Farm," he said. "No one came. There was no one there who knew her. When I got there, she looked at me. 'Billy,' she said, 'you have to get me out of here.' And I wanted to say, 'Of course I'll get you out of here.' But I didn't know if I could...."

And then something happened I had never seen. My father cried. Quietly, without moving. His big fist was still on the table.

"I haven't told anyone," he said. "I guess I was waiting for someone to ask."

I put my hand on my father's hand. He didn't move, stared straight ahead. He, the writer every day for fifty years, had never told this moment that gripped him so. He looked at me. A month later, he was gone.

As a writer now, I must ask myself for the deepest things. If I don't ask, maybe no one will. At my desk in the early morning: "Kim, what secret are you ready to tell — simple and direct — right now?"

If our stories are not in some way secret, they are not very interesting.

The Happy Problem of Form

Often, when a piece of writing begins, we don't know what it is. This is inefficient. This is probably unprofessional. And this is unavoidable, if we want to live by happy problems. For the discovery of form from the originating vantage point of unruly content is happy hunting. What does a given fragment of experience want to be?

In the middle of a film, it strikes me that the close-up on a big screen — a face ten feet tall — makes any

cinematic story psychological, and returns us to that time in childhood when proportion felt out of control.

What to do with that quirky thought? Is it an essay, the beginning of a movie review, a poem that gives the film version of a moment from childhood? Or is that part of a conversation inside a short story? If the answer is "story," then is it a new story, or is this the perfect new element in a story I already have in progress?

These questions form our happiness as writers. For "happiness" in the original sense is simply "hap," events, "what happens." To be happy is to be in keeping with events unfolding around me. This is the Tao of the writing craft: Don't fight. Don't suffer. Be with.

The writer Kawabata ended his career by rewriting one of his novels as a short story. He had to take that long path — from idea, to novel, to short story — to get the concise tale exactly right. In my own practice, essays were a mystery until I realized a letter with a title was my kind of essay. Letters were easy, essays were hard, until this bridge appeared. But without struggling with my teacher's version of "the essay," I might never have found my own.

One student told me, "I write about something in poetry because I don't know what to say about it in talk." Others use poems as rough drafts for essays, or glean favorite lines from prose journals to smuggle into poems. All this clumsy shuffling is exactly what we should be doing when we set out to learn the form a given episode of writing is trying to be. A student once told our class, "I keep thinking I'm going to learn how to write short stories, but by the time I finish one, all I have learned is how to write this short story. I still don't know how to write short stories. I guess I'll just have to keep learning, story by story."

The Happy Problem of Confusion

"I just don't get it." Remember in school when you said that sentence to yourself in despair, or to a teacher in hope? Translation: "Dear teacher, would you please get it for me?" Well, no, a teacher can't "get it for you." What do you do when you just don't get it?

As a writer now, I move sideways, try something oblique, bring in new material, start over with gusto. Not getting it means I must be doing original work. The feeling of not getting it is a good sign, not a paralyzing signal. The writing is hard because I am seeking connections that I did not know before — that nobody knew before. To proceed under such conditions is the hardest thing to do and the only thing worth doing.

The feeling of not getting it is like rain for the dry-land farmer — uncomfortable as you hunch on the tractor seat, but the best thing for the ground. This anxious feeling is the growing place. To be an expert — assured — is death to the process that creates expertise. For expertise comes from not knowing — yet.

I feel I am something of an expert on salutary confusion, having lived with its oblique cacophony for years. My wife says I get quiet when I have something big coming up — a speech to give, a new class about to begin, an essay brewing. "If I didn't know you," she says, "you might seem depressed. But that's not it. You're gathering new stuff, that's all. You *need* to get nervous to do it the way you like."

So, happy confusion is my nourishment. I'm not the chef standing at the stove reading a recipe. I'm the sauce itself, bit by heat and spice, all mixed up and cooking.

The Happy Problem of Error

Sometimes a fertile source for invention is to hear something wrong, or read something wrong, or make a "false" connection in mind, and then to recognize the original creation you have just made. In the weaving studio, someone calls across the room, "Will you help me when I dye?" But, of course, in my hearing I spell that last word "wrong," and suddenly feel ready to write a story to contain the plea, "Will you help me when I die?"

Listening to country music with the volume just a little too low can bring gold. Those lines you almost hear, and have to make up to make out, belong to you. Of course, with country, you never know whether you heard a line or made it up, so familiar is the sweet realm of cliché, "Like butter on bread, she spreads her love around..." Did I invent that, or hear it?

"She's a split level woman, I'm a mobile home man..." For years I thought I had made that up, then I learned otherwise. But anyone might make up such a gem by

—continued on page 35

Writing from the Feather Circle: Seeking a "Language of that Different Yield"

by

G. Lynn Nelson

◆

We want a language of that different yield. A yield rich as the harvests of earth, a yield that returns us to our own sacredness, to a self-love and respect that will carry out to others. —*Linda Hogan*, Dwellings.

There is a Buddhist saying that "When the student is ready, the teacher will come." I moved to Arizona over twenty years ago. I came here fresh from four years of the intellectual, left-brained rigors of graduate school. Beyond my approved study of sonnets and semicolons, however, I had been secretly reading New Physics and brain research and Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance — and hungering for much more than graduate school had fed me. In Buddhist terms, I was ready.

And my teachers came. If I hadn't been so hungry, I could easily have missed them. They were the occasional silent shadows among the noisy Anglo whiteness of my classes. They were the dark-eyed, tattered remnants of the genocide of American history. They were strangers in their own sacred land. They were Native Americans.

They have taught me well over the years (though I am still a novice, still learning). What I have learned from them, I use in all my classes — and in the very heartbeat of my life. So please remember: Whatever I share with you here is not just some little pedagogic trick for teachers who work with "Indians." It is about taking back a part of ourselves that has been lost, a part without which neither we nor our students nor our schools nor the very world can survive. It is about taking back our hearts — and, in turn, discovering "a language of that different yield."

Sometime during my first year of teaching here, one of those shadows shared with me a common saying among his people: "When you leave the reservation and go away to school, you have to leave your heart behind." Now isn't that the truth — for all of us, I sighed, remembering the years of memorization of sterile facts; remembering all the heartless, bloodless, meaningless critical analyses and expository essays; remembering being taught not to use the first person pronoun in formal writing . . . .

Not long thereafter, I was introduced to the feather circle. Now, many variations of the feather circle or talking circle exist among Native American tribes, and I do not pretend to know about them nor to be here a spokesman for them. But I have personally experienced one powerful common denominator, whether the circle is in the hogan or the tipi or the sweatlodge or the condominium or the writing classroom: When it is your turn to speak, when you hold the feather in your hand, you are encouraged to speak from your heart. *Speak from your heart.* That is all. Yet that simple dictum sends the blood of life pumping through empty skeletons of words and lives and, when used in my writing classes, restores the possibility of a "language of a far greater yield" than the more orthodox approaches of my academic training.

With such experiences in my heart, eight years ago I began teaching a section of first-year composition at

Arizona State University exclusively for Native American students. I wanted to go on learning from the Native American culture, and I wanted to use the feather circle as the guiding metaphor for our classroom and for our writing ....

Now, we have grown from that first little class of twelve students to three full sections of first-year composition for Native Americans. And I have come to use the feather circle approach to writing in all of my classes — my graduate level writing courses, my English methods courses, the Greater Phoenix Area Writing Project for teachers. And, I must confess, I have come to care little for the kind of writing — critical, left-brained, technical writing — that I was primarily trained to teach and to produce.

And my students and I have come to this: we believe our writing must begin in our own hearts and grow from our own caring and understanding. We also believe our language — not modern, manipulative, Madison-Avenue language nor the sterile language of the textbook, but authentic, careful, I-Thou language — is a part of our larger work, a tool to help save ourselves and save the planet.

Speaking of such things in freshman comp, of course, makes us mavericks. Still, we cannot help but look out the window and see that the Earth is dying and that we and our words have gone astray — and that somehow the two are connected. So our feather circle curriculum statement looks like this:

Tell me a story — a small story, a true story (or as true as you can tell it) — a story from your life. Tell me of a time when you were hurt or afraid. Or tell me of a time when you lost something — your keys, your heart, your mind, your mother or father, your way in the world. Or tell me about a small joy you had today. Tell me a story — and your telling it will change you — and your telling it to me will change me — and such stories will move us both a little closer to the light. Tell me a story — and then tell me another — and I will tell you mine — and we will sit in the feather circle and listen carefully to each other. And then we will write thank-you notes to each other for gifts given in these stories. And then we will do it again, anew. And we will continue doing this — until we heal ourselves, until everything begins to become properly precious, until we stop killing each other and destroying the Earth, until we care for it all so much that we ache, until we and the world are changed....

So, in our feather circle writing class, as in the traditional Native American feather circle, we try to write openly and honestly. We do not look for our words in the library; we try to find them in our hearts. We work on writing to ourselves in our personal journals ("How do I know what I know till I see what I say") before we write to the world. We try to find our own voices — not Shakespeare's or Hemingway's or Faulkner's, but our own. We try to use our words to find out who we are and what really matters in this world. And doing this, we often arrive at a very different place from where the commercials and the textbooks and the first-year composition directors would lead us.

And then, as we work the words from our hearts and our journals into public writing, so that we might share them with others, we let them seek a form. We try to let the form arise from the words themselves. We remember that as a baby grows in its mother's womb, the heart is first and all else comes from that. We remember that a heart can grow a skeleton, but a skeleton cannot grow a heart. We try, always, to start with the heart.

And so, while it may seem that we do not care much about "rhetoric" and "modes of composition" and such things of more orthodox writing classes down the hall, do not be deceived. It's just that we want our words to take shape like the clay in the potter's hands, like the wool in the weaving. We want them to hold up in the world outside the classroom. We want to be able to take our words home with us. We want them to help us survive and grow. We want them to be alive with our own living and loving — and to help others to live and love.

And they have. Without our ever intending, a group we call Native Images emerged from the First Year Comp class, and their writing has now touched hundreds of people of all ages and backgrounds. Over the past few years, we have done over a hundred presentations for classes, conferences, church services, and workshops. These Native American students have shared their writings and their hearts with audiences ranging from 350 seventh and eighth graders at an inner-city school to classrooms on the reservation to inmates at Arizona State Prison to NCTE conferences around the country.

Sometimes, when we do a Sharing (our readings, as one student put it, are not Show Business but Share Business), we bill our presentation as "A Drive-By Sharing by a Native American Gang." We call it thus because our experience has taught us that *everything in us gets published*, one way or another. That is, we need to tell our stories of our anger, our pain, our losses, our confusion — or they will sit in us until they translate themselves into some other language, almost always a language of violence. So a drive-by shooting by a gang or blowing up the Federal Building in Oklahoma or suicide or alcoholism or drug abuse are all "publishings" of the stories within us that must be told. So the feather circle writing has become for us a way toward healing, a ceremony in which the listeners/readers become an integral part of the process.

To give you a feel for the kind of writing that emerges from the feather circle, I have asked some students to share with you a piece of their writing from our work together. We invite you to honor us by being a part of our feather circle here on the printed page. [I will put in brackets before each piece a very brief version of the "assignment" that called forth the piece. Remember, too, that each finished work shared here was preceded by much personal/journal writing, by much vision and re-vision, and by help from peers in writing groups.]

A Drive-by Sharing by a Native American Gang

We begin with a prayer, a "Dancing Prayer," by Pierce Harrison, a prayer that is about both his pow-wow dancing and about our feather circle writing:

> *My name is Pierce Harrison, and I am a Yakama/Navajo from the state of Washington. I have been at Arizona State University off and on for five years. I have many plans for the future, but I don't know what the future has planned for me. I try to live by one simple rule: Enjoy the journey. I hope you enjoy my writings.*

[The assignment here was to write a prayer from your heart.]

Artwork by Hopi-Navajo student Mark Taho

Dancing Prayer by Pierce Harrison

Oh, Grandfather, give us a good song. A song with a perfect beat. Not too fast and not too slow. A song that makes me dance. A song that makes my feathers dance.

Oh, Grandfather, give them a good song. A song for the people. A song that they will feel. A song that will make them watch. A song that will make their ears smile.

Oh, Grandfather, give me a good song. A song that takes away my pains and my sorrows. A song that won't let me get tired. A song that will carry me and let me tell my story. A song that fills me with pride. Oh, Grandfather, give me a good one.

[The assignment: tell us a story about a time of loss in your life.]

Blues Tape by Pierce Harrison

My Grandpa, from whom I get my name, lying in the cold hospital bed, said to me, "Go dance. Go dance hard and win. Dance for me, my legs don't work anymore."

I looked at my Dad with a tear in one eye and determination in the other.

He shook his head and looked at his Dad in the same way.

My mom stayed with Grandpa as my Dad and I hit the trail without her for the first time.

A four-hour drive to Nespelum and the Porcupine singers was the only tape we played. Porcupine was the host drum that year, and I couldn't wait to dance to their songs.

My Grandpa's words kept repeating in my head, so I practiced in the back of our old red pow-wow van during the whole drive. Sneak-ups, duck and dives, crow hops, fast songs, slow songs. I danced to them all in that little space between the bench seat and the cooler.

Then it was time. We got Porcupine for the first song and old Slimjohn's drum for the second. I danced like my Grandpa told me to dance, and through my face paint I looked for him.

When we returned, I handed my Grandpa all of my first place winnings and a recording of Porcupine and told him that it would make him feel better.

He called it his "blues tape," and six months later it was given back to me.

Now it is my "blues tape," and it makes me feel better.

****

My name is Lori Chee. I am an eighteen-year-old Navajo woman pursuing a degree in English Education. I'm originally from the Black Mesa area, where I spent my childhood summers losing sheep. I am from the strong words of my Mother (Near the-Water Clan), the reassuring smile of my Father (Water-Flows-Together Clan), the protection of my Maternal Grandfather (Bitter Water Clan), and the kissable cheek of my Paternal Grandfather (One-Who-Walks-Around Clan).

[Share a word-picture from a Turning Point in your life.]

Frybread Love by Lori Chee

Sunlight lay upon his curly, dark hair as he sat in front of the huge window in his favorite vinyl brown chair. "Shi yazhi make some frybread for Che Che. Achoodi." The tiny frame of the three-year-old girl bounced into the imaginary kitchen built by Che Che's loving heart. She slapped the dough like Grandma, stretched it to the perfect circumference, and fried it in the love she had for her Che Che. Excited, she ran over to her dying Grandpa to give him his daily smile, a delicious frybread only he could taste and feel the hot grease drip between his fingers. She sat leaning against his chest, hearing the frybread comfort his heart. He wrapped the warmth of love around her body and said, "Ahe he, shi yazhi."

****

I am Jennifer Nasewytewa. I am from the village of Sungopavi in Second Mesa, Arizona. I am Water Clan from the Hopi Reservation.

[Answer the question, "Where are you from?"]

Seeds of Many Directions by Jennifer Nasewytewa

Her great-grandmother told her that she comes from the earth around the vicinity of Puerto Rico. From the dark depths of the green waters, she rose. She rose. Phoenix from the flames. She rose to greet this fourth world given to her by Masauwu, keeper of fire and death. Her body tired from the journey through the bamboo shoot of the third world, she rose.

Her great-uncle told her that she was created from the great bear. Masauwu sent her to this place to find the great bear, and she was bear people. She is to use the strength of the bear for healing.

Her grandmother told her that she was created by Gogyeng Sowhuti, Spider Grandmother, and her two warrior grandsons, Pokanghoya and Polongahoya. They created people in the fourth world.

Her grandfather told her that she is a creation of God. He gave his life on the cross so that she could live.

Her father told her that she was an accident and that she should have been a boy. He told her that he never intended for her to be here. He told her that she belonged to a different man. This man denies her through his drunken slurs.

Her seeds were planted in many different directions. They didn't follow the colors of the corn. She came from the depths of the water through a bamboo shoot that was created for her by the Lord Jesus Christ to find a bear to use its healing powers to free her from the drunken words of a creation never intended.

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I am Keith Slim-Tolagai. Kinlichini nishli, Toahani bashichiin, Todich'iini dashicheii adoo Tsenjinkini ei dashi nali. Be'ak'idba'ahoodzani dee ei nasha.

[Tell us a story of one of your losses.]

Shi Masani by Keith Slim-Tolagai

Spring sang my grandmother to sleep with its secret warm wind. My grandmother left with the melting of the snow and the growth of green grass. We were left lost and unaccepting. The sheep knew she was gone and tried looking for her that summer. They wandered aimlessly, searching in the gentle rain. The sky wept. The autumn leaves knew; they swirled and spiraled in the air, frenzied in the cold breeze, looking, it seemed, for someone. Winter came. Even she knew as she covered the earth with her white blanket. She told us then to accept our loss. I saw rainbows around the silver sun that day. It was cold and I remember that breeze from the north. The horses whinnied and pranced. They danced on snow and the sheep stood still and looked to the north, tasting the air. Even the scraggly dogs sat quiet, attentive. We had gathered to celebrate as we had always done, but our hearts were heavy. Our strength was missing. He came that day, my uncle, bringing with him a silver bucket full of chilled fruits and set it in front of my aunt. Then a shaft of sunbeam broke through the ash-covered clouds and shined on the bucket. It shimmered. We sat, quiet, watching tiny crystals sparkle and the jeweled fruits blaze in the sunlight. Then we cried. It was then we knew that our grandmother had been in the mist of the summer rain. She had been in the breeze, singing the leaves to dance. She was in the rainbows, the turquoise sky. She was in the smile of my mother, the touch of my aunts. She was in the eyes of my cousins, the strength of my sisters. She had been with us all the time. She is not lost.

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And so my students go on amazing me and teaching me .... And down the hall in other rooms, other students are writing in the "modes of rhetoric" — they are writing serialization papers and comparison papers and classification papers. They are learning to make proper skeletons in their English classes, for their English classes. I do not doubt that this is a good thing to do, but still I wonder: Do they take their words home with them? Do their words help them toward peace, toward love? Do their words reach out to others? And I think of the line from Arlene's poem to her mother about being sent away to boarding school: "You did not know they would take away my songs and my prayers."

We cannot live by the left brain alone. Language is not a subject in school — that is just some perverted thing we have done with it. Language is a miracle, a gift given to us as much for songs and prayers as for expository essays. More than ever, we need the power of this "language of a different yield." More than ever, our students need it.

I am convinced that what my Native American students have done and are doing can be done anywhere, in any writing classroom, by any students of any age. It does not take a $50,000 grant or a new textbook adoption or a resolution by the school board. It only takes a quiet belief in the power of people and words — and a reliance upon our heart's vision. And the rest will begin to happen.

Lynn Nelson is the director of the Greater Phoenix Area Writing Project. An earlier version of this piece appeared in G. Lynn Nelson's book, Writing and Being: Taking Back our Lives through the Power of Language, *published by Lura Media.*

Practicing What We Preach
(or the Teacher as Supermodel!)

by

DON HUMBERTSON

◆

Don Humbertson coordinates the secondary English program for Fairfax County Public Schools and teaches in the English teacher education program at George Mason University. He is a teacher-consultant for the Northern Virginia Writing Project.

Viewpoint

Well, the latest issue of *Sports Illustrated is* out (so I've heard!), and once again, I've resisted the urge to run out and buy it. Of course, I still argue that what makes the midwinter issue of *SI* the biggest seller of the year is the wonderful sports coverage, not the bountiful swimsuit photos. It's the same logic we men "used to" use when buying Hugh Hefner's monthly tribute to literacy. It was the cerebral titillation of the famous people interviews that drove us to *Playboy*'s presses, the body ink not yet dry on the glossy intellectual covers! Literacy, after all, has always found sex to be a worthy companion (see Shakespeare, Pasternak, Hawthorne, Allende, and a million others.)

In the classroom, however, the enticement to read or write is often less alluring. Many of us bend over backwards telling our students how important it is to read and write. We beg, cajole, and promise them rich rewards if they will read and write. A few take us at our word or succumb to outside pressure to give reading a fair shake. But many students demand a more compelling reason than vague promises for a distant future.

I would like to suggest another approach to motivating indifferent students. Instead of telling them about the value of literacy, show them. And what better context to demonstrate the power of reading and writing than our own lives?

What happens in a lot of our classrooms is that we often fail to model the very literacy we are trying to convince our students to value. As we think back to our own English teachers over the years, we remember that most of them tried to teach us to value reading and writing — and yet how many times did we see our teachers exhibiting the same behavior they were expecting of us? How many of our teachers talked to us about what they were reading and writing? How many of them brought in books that they were reading and talked about them? How often did they show us their writing or write with us in class?

Think of other professions. All license practitioners who can *show* that they can do whatever the profession does. Doctors have to perform successful operations; electricians have to wire buildings; computer analysts have to diagnose and fix programs and computers. But education is quick to license people who have "served their seat time" or passed the courses. Yes, I know, we've gotten better in the last decade. We've "upped the ante" with more exams, better student teaching programs, and more content demands. But are we asked to perform like our professional counterparts before we are licensed?

How many of us teachers would still have jobs if we were required to be master readers, writers, speakers, listeners before we could teach others?

It seems to me that the least we should do is model for our students what we want them to value. For example, I've recently finished reading Doris Kearns Goodwin's *Wait Till Next Year*. I couldn't wait to share it with my education

students, to tell them how it brought back such vivid memories of learning to love the Brooklyn Dodgers, of growing up in the Eisenhower era, of learning about the opposite sex, and struggling to become a teenager. I couldn't wait to tell my students how I connected with Goodwin's book. Not because I want them to read it, but because I want them to see that reading is important to me, that it enriches my life and gives me knowledge and pleasure. How could I stand in front of them and preach about adult literacy if I did not value it myself?

How can I stand in front of students and try to convince them of the power of writing for their lives if I never let them see the power of writing in my own life?

And the same is true with writing. How can I stand in front of students and try to convince them of the power of writing for their lives if I never let them see the power of writing in my own life? I cringe when I think back to the times that I gave my students a writing assignment in class and then retreated behind my desk to grade papers or fill out administrative forms. What message was I sending to them? But I'll also never forget the first time I wrote something and shared it with my students. It was a response to Kristi Walker who was upset that I wanted her to change the ending of her *Macbeth* paper. She had told me in no uncertain terms that she liked the ending and that she really didn't understand my suggestion. So I responded to her in writing, and as I wrote I came to understand the importance of Kristi's point of view and the unfairness of my suggestion. I read my response out loud and the class followed-up with the best discussion we had had to that point. Everyone suddenly connected because Kristi and I had connected. *Macbeth* was no longer a required reading we were plowing through; it became a literacy vehicle for our thinking, our talking, and our writing. And I found that as I continued to write and share with my students, they connected and invested in their own literacy.

So, practically speaking, what do we need to do? First, we need to expand our own reading — to read lots of different stuff from trashy novels to philosophy to good nonfiction. We need to enter into the dialogue about how a book affects us, not focus on literary acclaim or our graduate school notes. Second, we need to write more — to write for ourselves, to sort out stuff, to discover what we think, to preserve memories, to play with language. We need to write with and for our students. If they see us working through a piece of writing, struggling to write an interesting introduction and fighting to produce coherency, they'll realize that writing isn't easy, that we don't always get it right the first time, and that revision usually improves our writing. And third, we need to share with our students why we write and read, and how it makes a difference in our lives.

In short, we have to be literacy role models. Literacy, like teaching, is not a destination; it's a journey, and along the way our students need good models. The National Writing Project knew this 20 years ago when it first gathered together a group of teachers to write and talk about teaching writing. That model continues to be the best we can offer our students — and ourselves — today.

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Virtual Reality:
Evaluating Online Information

by

Holly Littlefield

◆

It all started with Sean Ellickson. He had shoulder-length, red dreadlocks and a triple-pierced eyebrow. His baggy jeans and T-shirt were generally so filled with holes that they only seemed to remain on his body by some amazing combination of faith, safety pins, and duct tape. He owned five Volkswagen Bugs, and his hobby was fixing and restoring these cars to mint condition. He also played guitar in several local coffee shops. In a class filled with business majors, he stood out.

For their first persuasive paper, I asked my students to pick a topic that they really cared about, an issue that they could research and take a stand on. He chose legalizing marijuana. Generally this is a topic that I try to discourage. I've read too many first-person accounts of the benefits of getting high to really want to have to plow through still more of that. But Sean convinced me that this really was a topic that mattered to him, so I shrugged and set him loose. However, I must admit that I cringed a little when I read the opening sentence of his rough draft. "What do Bill Clinton, Justice Sandra Day O'Connor, and Pavarotti all have in common? They all use pot on a regular basis." Well, at least he'd followed my suggestion to open with something to catch the reader's attention. When I talked with him about his paper, I asked about the source for this opening quote. He told me that he'd found it on a really cool Web site: "www.weed, or something like that." For over a year or so, I'd been noticing the gradual addition of Web sites into my students' research projects, but www.weed served as a wake-up call.

It was becoming pretty clear that my students were woefully unprepared for the complexities of online research. Considering the difficulty that many of them have with standard, less complex print sources, this didn't come as much of a surprise.

Those of us who teach students to research know that one of the challenges of our job is to get students to question their sources, to realize that every writer has some bias, that every story has another side or two or three and that many sources may have hidden — and sometimes not so hidden — agendas. I remind my students of the now-famous phrase from the sixties, "Question Authority," and I point out that if they do a search for the origins of that phrase, they will find that it has been attributed to several different people over the years. The originator may in fact be impossible to ever reliably determine. I also ask students to compare articles on the same subject from two ideologically different periodicals — say, *Mother Jones* and the *Wall Street Journal* — and they begin to see how the biases of each journal play themselves out in print as they note what information gets included and what doesn't, who gets quoted and who does not. We also look at whose facts and statistics are given and what rhetoric is used to frame the issue. This helps students to begin to see that the sources they once thought were neutral are in fact heavily biased.

I also talk with my students about the editorial process, a system of careful cutting and selection. I point out that every quote or sound bite that makes its way into an article or newscast is probably the end product

of an interview that may have lasted for over an hour. I ask them to read excerpts from several revealing books on how the news gets "produced" as well as Debra Seagal's article, "On the Cutting Room Floor" that described the biased selection process that goes into creating "true life" and "real crime" police docudramas. I also describe my own experience as a production intern at a public radio station where part of my job involved lifting quotes from interviews and "cleaning up" interviewees' grammar problems, including being told to make one African American student sound more "intelligent" by editing out his use of nonstandard English.

We talk about the difference between opinion and fact, and I try to get them to question the authority of the experts they use and to remember that three other experts might very well have three other opinions. Recently, during one such discussion, my students took particular interest. Melissa, nodding her head, drew a parallel, "It's like those movie reviews. Every time Siskel and Ebert say something is fantastic, I end up hating it." Then Emily added, "Yeah, and those ads in the paper are the worst. They list about twenty critics raving about a movie that's a piece of trash."

Matt found that "Smashing!" in one ad was actually lifted from this quote, "Besides smashing heads and jiggling bikinis, this film has little to offer."

So we decided to look a little more closely at the movies, or at least at the ads and reviews that get quoted in them. We talked about the dangers of decontextualized quotes, and I sent them off to find some of the actual reviews that were quoted in several movie ads. Natalie brought in an example from the film *Boogie Nights*. The ad for the movie quoted Richard Corliss's review from *Time* magazine, "*Boogie Nights* is *Goodfellas* meets *Pulp Fiction*." However, the actual review was less enthusiastic. Corliss originally said, "*Boogie Nights* has panoramic ambition: a tapestry-style narrative, labyrinthine tracking shorts, explosions of random, firecracker violence. *Nashville* meets *Goodfellas* meets *Pulp Fiction*. The film doesn't quite get there." A long way from the ad's implications. Matt found that "Smashing!" in one ad was actually lifted from this quote, "Besides smashing heads and jiggling bikinis, this film has little to offer."

Several students also pointed out that most movie ads quote reviews from TV or radio sources that really can't be checked out. Too often my students have been all too willing to believe anything if it's in print. Exercises like these help to get them to start questioning their sources to become more skeptical. One of my colleagues at the University of Minnesota, Don Ross, recently surveyed composition students about their research methods. He was particularly interested in how they determined the relevancy and accuracy of their sources. He found that most students looked only at the first few sources they found and that while they attached some importance to what their instructors and the library staff had to say about these sources, for the most part "students decide pretty much on their own what is important or true." He suggested that most instructors probably are not doing enough to help students reach this kind of determination.

Asking students to question the authority and veracity of their sources has become even more important in the era of cyberspace. The Internet is exploding with information available at the click of a button. But often our students have little skill at evaluating the effectiveness, validity, or reliability of their Internet sources. Their willingness to believe anything in print extends to the cyberpage as well. Sean is an intelligent young man, but he hadn't bothered to think much about the veracity of his source. When I asked him to reflect on the likelihood of Bill Clinton continuing to get high in the White House or of Sandra Day O'Connor smoking a joint in the Supreme Court, he agreed that it seemed pretty unlikely.

It is important to note that students are not the only ones duped into believing Internet hoaxes. In one of the most publicized scams of recent times, the well-respected correspondent Pierre Salinger made a fool of himself by giving credence to the conspiracy theory that TWA flight 800 had been shot down by a Navy missile. Salinger's claims created a national stir, caused unnecessary pain and distress to the victims' families, and were utterly groundless. His "excellent" source was an Internet site run by the now infamous Ian Godderd — an unreliable conspiracy monger whose Web site included information about alien abductions and JKF assassination plots, as well as the erroneous

TWA flight 800 information. Months after Salinger's claims were totally discredited and all the brouhaha had died down, Ian Goddard admitted in a written statement to CNN that he had in fact made all the information up because he "wanted to give the government a black eye by any means that looked opportune." Later, however, when I visited his Web site, I found that the false claims about flight 800 were still there. Similarly, Matt Drudge of the now notorious "Drudge Report" Web site publishes a variety of stories from the mundane to the titillating. Although he claims that he is about 80% correct, most of his sources are uncredited. He became an overnight sensation when his Web page first broke the Monica Lewinsky story after *Newsweek* decided that they didn't have enough evidence of wrongdoing to run it. This is not to suggest that print sources with their editors and fact checkers are always right or reliable; they may or may not be better than the Drudge Report. However, this raises another interesting point about the Web that is often lost on our students and others: unlike print and other traditional media sources, the Internet needs no publisher and no editorial board. Anyone can put anything online without checking its accuracy or validity in any way, and they often do.

For example, when one Internet writer decided that an article he found online called "Advice, Like Youth, Probably Just Wasted on the Young," sounded like something Kurt Vonnegut might have written, he added it to his Vonnegut Web site. Several others followed suit. In a short while it was national news that Kurt Vonnegut was trying to plagiarize writer Mary Schmich's work. Vonnegut publicly denied writing the article in question and gave full credit to Schmich, apologizing to her for any distress that the incident had caused, even though he was completely innocent of any misdeed. However, over a year and a half later, most Vonnegut Web cites still credited the article to him.

This brings up another important criticism of Web sources. Although the medium is transitory and metamorphic in nature, a Web site may become semipermanent and long term in its inaccuracy. Frequently, Web sites are undated, unlabeled, unreliable, and not updated.

However, it is important to remember that despite its problems, the Internet is probably the most important and exciting research tool ever invented. It presents us with powerful and exciting possibilities as well as significant challenges. So my students and I have started looking at and evaluating Web sites.

Initially I ask students to apply the same criteria to evaluate Web sites as they do to their print sources. The traditional print evaluation criteria of authority, accuracy, currency, coverage, and objectivity are good places to start.

Authority: Who wrote the Web page? Is an author even listed? If so, can you find out any information about his or her credentials? Is the site affiliated with a reputable organization like a government agency or a university?

Accuracy: How accurate does the information seem to be? Can you check any of the facts, studies, statistics, or quotes given on the page? Does the information seem to mesh with what you already know about the subject and with what other sources are saying? Have other reliable sources referred to or linked you to this site?

Coverage: How thorough is the site? Does it provide you with helpful, detailed information? Are there a variety of carefully selected links to allow browsers to access further information?

Currency: When was the site created and when was it last updated? On the Web, where currency is both easy and expected, an infrequently updated site is automatically suspect. Also, are the links updated in addition to the site itself?

Objectivity: Does the site seem to provide balanced, thoughtful information or is it heavily biased or inflammatory?

After considering these traditional evaluation criteria, I ask students to also look at cyber-specific features. Is the site fast, usable, friendly, and cool? Does it provide helpful links to other sites, interesting graphics, and multimedia options? Is it original and creative? Does it provide its users with any real reasons to return to it?

I have my students read what other online sources have to say about evaluating Web sites (see a list in the bibliography at the end of the article) and together we come up with a list of important criteria to apply to our Web sources. I also try to make students aware of the other problems inherent in this new and quickly changing medium. Recently, many online services have begun to respond to the overwhelming amount of information on the Web by offering (usually for a fee) a service that provides an online review of Web sites. James Rettig's online article "Beyond Cool" does an excellent job of pointing out the strengths and weaknesses of a plethora of these evaluators. Although touted as excellent time savers, most of these services provide no criteria for their evaluations and rarely look beyond the aesthetics of the site, usually ignoring the quality and reliability of a site's information. Instead, if it looks "cool" and has some neat graphics, it's rated highly.

One site that gets high marks for appearance is FORCES (www.forces.org). I ask my students to evaluate this award-winning, pro-tobacco site. Initially, they find it impressive. According to Ryan, "This site is up front about its intentions. You can actually access information here, judge its credibility yourself." The site's sheer size, apparent comprehensiveness, appealing design, and ease of navigation all clearly contribute to its favorable reviews.

But a closer look reveals highly suspicious information. This site, which claims to provide "Important news stories you'd most likely not see in your local papers," presents page after page of "medical" reports that supposedly refute all conventional medical knowledge about the health dangers of smoking. However, as David noted, "Although the site gave sources from where its information came from, the information was often only presented as a small quote from an entire study. I am not very trusting of quotes unless I can see their entire source." Jeff stated that "The evidence section just seemed pretty fruity to me, what are all these journals they keep quoting? I've never heard of any of them." Tracy wanted to know, "Where are the links? Most sites have links to dozens of other good sites. Forces only gives propaganda links to get you to write to congress in support of pro-tobacco legislation."

She's right; the site provides nothing to help users determine the validity of any of the hundreds of

Websites: Information and More

Because I teach business writing, I want my students to be able to judge not only the authority, accuracy and objectivity of sites, but also their effectiveness in promoting the enterprises they represent. So in addition to institutional sites such as the American Cancer Society, we also looked at commercial sites such as Walmart and Target. Here are some student comments on these sites.

www.wal-mart.com

There are too many options which make the site seem overwhelming to search through. There seems to be lots of wasted, unnecessary information.

You need additional software to access their stocks and annual reports — a dead end for me.

I was bombarded by about 150 options as to where to go. It seemed like Wal-Mart was attempting to sell the entire store and everything in it on this single page.

www.target.com

Nice set of links to family-friendly activities and links. The table of contents makes navigation a breeze, but it should be on the front page.

I couldn't view any of the merchandise, Target's main reason for a site, isn't it?

They add to their credibility by promoting their charity support online, as well as the education thing and their community support. Smart.

www.cancer.org

Even in the news section, I couldn't find a date for when it was last updated. This hurts its credibility. Some of the information here is very date sensitive.

It offers a generous amount of information as well as helpful links for people looking for information about cancer and its treatment. It also gives an 800 number for those needing to talk to a real person.

I only found the Hope, Progress, and Answers links by accident. Maybe they could feature a few positive things more prominently.

studies it cites or the "health" information it provides. None of the journals and studies that it cites are linked, no health organization of any kind is linked, and there is no easy way to check the accuracy of any of the information provided by Forces.com.

Also, many students were turned off by the site's lack of objectivity. Although they realized that Forces.com is meant to be wholeheartedly pro-tobacco, most students were disturbed by what was to them the site's inability to consider the other side of the issue. Carrie wrote, "They don't even touch on why people want things to be smoke-free. They just keep saying that if you aren't allowed to smoke then you aren't really free. It just seems like Forces is yelling throughout the entire Website." Mark added, "What really annoyed me was the note for anti-smokers: 'Don't bother spilling your bile here. Go to a site that really cares.' After seeing this, I felt that I had enough of this site. That statement showed that they had no understanding of the other side of the argument, and people like that shouldn't be taken seriously." Tracy was also bothered by Forces' attitude: "The site rudely dismisses nonsmokers and is disrespectful in its tone — that makes me know I've seen enough."

Several students took a hard look at the site's impressive layout and fun graphics. Nadia said, "At first I liked their use of frames and all the color and moving words, but then all the flashing got to be distracting. I wanted to just turn off the little red flashing sentences." Mindy summed it up, noting, "I think that this site is not for serious people. I'd guess that they target younger kids or people who are not very well educated." However, despite the many problems my students describe, Forces.com has been praised by Lycos, Magellan, and LookSmart.

David Citron writes in his CyberCurmudgeon Column of another alarming new development that most people are unaware of in cyber research. He reports that some online search engines have now started selling their top spots — those sites that appear in the first ten or twenty hits in a supposedly random search — to the highest bidders. He points out that the ethics of this are equivalent to a newspaper selling its front page stories to the highest paying corporations or political candidates. This become even more alarming when we remember Ross's survey that found that students generally only consider the first few sources that they find, often lacking the persistence to sort through dozens of print sources let alone the thousands of Web sites that may result from an online search.

It is clear that the Internet provides our students with a wealth of exciting opportunities. Online resources continue to grow exponentially. With the click of a button, our students can go from the New York Times online to the Drudge Review, from the American Cancer Society to Forces.com, and they can exchange email with experts, charlatans, friends, and pedophiles. We need to provide them with tools beyond a mouse, a modem, and a monitor to access and evaluate the barrage of information available to them. They need to understand that just because they found it on the Web doesn't mean they have a great source. They need to become better skeptics and learn to "question authority," whoever said it first.

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Do You Remember Me?

Writing Oral Histories with Nursing Home Residents

by

CATHIE ENGLISH

◆

Horse and buggy. Milking cows. Jumpin' Jack. John Dillinger. William Tell. Peru State College. What do all of these have in common? If you type one of these words into a World Wide Web search engine such as Alta Vista or Yahoo!, you may find yourself linked to the Aurora High School's junior class oral history project. My students' Web page is an electronic version of our book, *Elderly Voices — Living Links to the Past*, a collection of narratives of nursing home residents in Hamilton County, Nebraska. This project, which involved three school districts in three Nebraska counties, sent high school students into nursing homes to collect history from the very elderly.

Project Background

I began thinking about an undertaking like this in May, 1997, when Aurora's city administrator, Mike Bair, approached me about orchestrating a project to preserve stories of the elderly. The impetus: his wife, my teaching colleague, Alice Bair, had regrets about not recording some of the family history before her 100-year-old grandmother died. As Mike lamented, "Now all that personal history is lost."

Lost stories. Those words rang loud in my ears. I thought about my own father and his natural gift for storytelling. He had entertained us for hours when we were kids. A few years ago, I gave him a tape recorder to record some of his memories. Of course, the tape recorder sat. He never did do it, and now I know why. Recording oral histories is a daunting task.

The means and skills for acquiring personal stories began to come together in June 1997, when I was a participant in the Nebraska Writing Project Rural Institute in Henderson, Nebraska. A focus of the institute was on heritage and place, but when I was asked to write about *my* place, I found that I knew very little about Aurora, Nebraska, population 4000. I had lived for five years in this community at the heart of one of the richest corn-growing regions in America. Aurora, a town of quiet, tree-lined streets with well-maintained Victorian houses, has the lowest crime rate of any town on I-80. It is a place where the students at our high school of 300 see no reason to padlock their lockers. But while I knew surface facts and had cursory impressions, I knew little of the rich heritage that has contributed to the present culture of our region. Speakers at the writing project institute motivated me to work with my students to find out much more about this community which was our home, and Carol Gulyas, institute coordinator, suggested ways to get grant money to pay for our work.

Scholar Support

Immediately after the institute, I wrote mini-grants, and in September, I received notice of our awards. Two cooperating scholars would be available: Nancy Duncan, a professional storyteller, and Barbara

Sommer, an oral historian. Both would be in our schools early in October. Nancy, who has experience working in schools, demonstrated a talent for entertaining students while at the same time tackling with them psychological issues relevant to the work they would be doing. What, she asked, will the nursing home residents think of you? What do you think of them? She tried to dispel the myths the two groups might hold of one another: teenagers are drug-using, good-for-nothings. People in nursing homes drool and soil their pants. Nancy was interested in getting the personal stories, the colorful memories, the entertaining pieces. She wanted the students to create story maps and then tell the stories back to the residents. She talked to students about the importance of honoring each resident's story. Is it true to character? Does it convey the intended meaning? Have you kept the spirit of the story? Nancy also wanted to see visual art incorporated into the project, so we had one class of art students attend a session to talk about sketching the residents' portraits.

Barbara Sommer familiarized students with legal issues, emphasizing the need for release forms for the use of the stories and photographs in both the hard copy and electronic versions. Further, Barbara introduced students to some skills they would need for their interviews: how to pull detail from an interviewee, how to formulate open-ended and follow-up questions that would encourage an outpouring of rich information, how to find story threads in emerging narratives. Barbara also brought in state-of-the-art recording equipment and each of our classes performed mock interviews with peers.

The Process

Once Nancy and Barbara had attended our classes, we were ready for our first visit to Memorial Community Care Home in Aurora. I had established student teams of two or three and matched each with a resident. Our initial visit was solely for the purpose of socialization. On the bus trip to the homes the students were very quiet. I knew they had apprehensions. I knew that despite our preparation they were not sure what they would say to the residents. After we arrived, students began knocking on residents' doors. When no one responded to a knock, the students were extremely shy and afraid to crack the door open and check to see if the resident was awake. But the staff assured us that it was all right to wake people up, so students became more comfortable and less apprehensive. When students did enter a room, they often found a homey atmosphere that some had not anticipated. There were arm chairs and a television, and often photographs of family and friends and handicrafts the residents had made. Some rooms had knickknacks and flowers on the night stands. Though some of the residents were confused as to why we were there, most were grateful to have visitors, and all had the typical politeness that is a given for their generation.

The atmosphere on the bus ride back to school was quite a contrast to the atmosphere on our earlier trip. The noise level had risen, stories were being exchanged: "Mrs. English, my guy remembers dirt drifts in the Dust Bowl;" "Mrs. English, our lady worked in a bank that was robbed by John Dillinger!"

Students took these tidbits of information and went to work in their American history classes conducting research in the media center, so they would understand more about these events and people. After the research process, students were ready for the actual taping sessions. Students labeled and taped their introductions onto their tapes, gathered up their tape recorders and notebooks and pens, and we traveled once again to the nursing home. Most of the students were surprised that many of the residents had forgotten them already, but as the teenagers gently prodded with, "Do you remember me?" residents began to focus, interviewers and interviewees were put at ease and the interviews began.

From "The Life of Merna Wall"
by Dennis Roberts, Brady Johnson and Jeremiah Fisher

We then asked about the Dirty Thirties. She had a lot to say. It was all dirty all the time. When they woke up, they would have dirt and grime in their eyes, and dirt on their nose and lips. They didn't have electricity so they didn't have a fan, so their days were very hot, and the nights were cooler so they would sleep with the window open a little bit. When they got up in the morning, there would be a lot of dirt on the floor and they would have to walk through it. They had oak floors and the dirt and sand would be rough on their feet. They couldn't eat breakfast till they had washed the table first, because there would be a layer of dirt on it.

On my rounds through the nursing home, I found some pairs working very well. The residents were providing long, descriptive passages, filled with interesting details, and students were asking appropriate follow up questions. I also found pairs that weren't working. A resident might be nonresponsive, a patience-trying experience for the student partners. Sometimes the students had to ask the same question several times; sometimes a resident would only talk about one thing. Eva was fixated on World War II and the rationing during that period. Rudy repeatedly came back to a horse named Joe. Often they simply couldn't remember — after all, some were beyond their hundredth year. They needed a memory trigger, and my students were struggling to come up with one that worked. What did residents remember of Adolph Hitler, the dust bowl, childhood games? What was a typical day like on the farm?

A resident as sketched by Ben Brill

Other students had a much easier time of it. According to Andrea and Brooke, "We began the interview by asking Virginia how many brothers and sisters she had. An hour later, she had not only told us her entire life history but the history of most of her relatives. We never got to our second question!"

My students and I learned useful lessons as we went through the interview process. We learned to compensate for hearing loss almost inevitably suffered by these elderly folks. Most of my students learned to knock loudly, to talk loudly, to enunciate clearly, and also to speak slowly and maintain eye contact at all times. An important factor in the eventual success of the interview turned out to be whether or not the student interviewer could be heard on the first visit.

The most successful interviewers created comfortable situations for the residents, offering few surprises. When students entered they offered handshakes and introduced themselves, telling residents why they had come. Interviewers learned to keep things simple, asking one question at a time and clarifying answers to the questions.

One of the most interesting facets of the project was the inclusion of third-year art students. These students accompanied us on our visit to Memorial Community Care. They too were partnered and sketched the same resident. The art students were well prepared by their instructor, Ms. Pam Brechbill. She taught them how to ask for permission to sketch and demonstrated ways to help the residents feel at ease. It helped, of course, that residents were attending to the questions posed by my English students, a process that relaxed them and drew their attention from the sketch artists.

Interviews done and tapes secured, my students began the most difficult process of all: transcribing, the dreaded "T word," as they called it. Students used headsets to listen to the tapes, and we transcribed for several days in class. I found some partners working together with two sets of headphones, while others split up the job, one transcribing while the other started the narrative. Some students would write

Charlotte Killion as sketched by Megan Pirnie

longhand and others would type at the computers, but all would start, stop, rewind, stop, start, rewind the tape recorders. If students had difficulty understanding words on the tape, they'd ask for my help. Often I could decipher the words, but just as often, the words were too muddled and indistinguishable. For some, transcription was an insurmountable task. One student cried when he could not make sense out of the tape, his partner dropped out at semester, and he was left alone to finish the job. Sadly, the tape disappeared. Two other groups had a similar experience. Remarkably, the remaining 102 students did finish writing the narratives.

Students were responsible for transforming the transcription into a coherent, structured narrative. Students found that much of their narrative came in bits and pieces that they had to structure into a story. At this point I got pretty heavily involved. When I went over the rough drafts, I drew many arrows. I tried to show the students how to put together bits about family members or pieces of farm stories all in the same paragraph.

When students had completed the final draft of their narratives, we scheduled a follow-up interview at the nursing home. Students read aloud the narratives and asked for verification and clarification. Even after this process, I felt students needed more response, so I asked residents' families to look over the stories, a step which led to some further revisions. But for the most part, students had gotten the information straight.

With our final draft narratives in hand, we scheduled several days in the computer lab with our archaic IBM 386s. Undaunted by outdated computer equipment, we created basic Web pages in Microsoft Works with the help and instruction of our computer programming teacher, Mr. Michael Derr. Mr. Derr showed my students some very basic HTML prompts helpful in creating colored backgrounds, providing headings, linking to other Web pages, and including images. Though this computer work was a first-time experience for about ninety percent of my students, almost all completed the work.

Challenges

This past spring, with the Web pages near completion and the evaluation of students done, I spent some time in reflection. What would make future oral history projects work better? For one thing I'd want a longer block of time. I found 47-minute class periods constraining. In such a short time, it was difficult to establish the fluidity required for an in-depth interview. A successful interview requires get-acquainted time, time for bonding. My colleague at another school district, Dorothy Apley, worked on a 90-minute block schedule, a time period that allowed interviewers to establish intimacy, to ask follow up questions and develop thematic threads.

Further, I would involve fewer students in the project, perhaps 40 students rather than 110. Mrs. Apley's smaller Geneva group achieved an intimacy that I admired but was unable to emulate because of our large numbers. It was difficult for me to coach individual students as 110 teenagers worked to write

publishable pieces. A smaller group would have made this task less overwhelming.

In addition, if I tackle this project again, I'd schedule more time with each professional scholar— at least a week for each. I'd also give greater emphasis to a study of the times in which our interviewees lived, perhaps by focusing on a single decade.

Finally, I'd try to update some of the technology. If we had had external microphones rather than the tape recorder's internal mike, we would have been bothered much less by the ambient noise that made it difficult to hear and transcribe the interviews. Another more advanced technological prop is on the way — a publication center with the newest computers. With these new computers, students will have a chance to immediately view their Web page designs rather than, one at a time, opening files at the teacher's computer. That limitation was a definite challenge to my tech-head students who were frustrated by text-based presentation without the visual effects.

Achievements

While in retrospect I can think of many ways to fine tune what we did, our project brought all who participated in it much joy. The number one pleasure was the interaction with the residents. One resident, Orson, had been very ill for some time, was bedridden and on oxygen. The first day his interviewers were absent, so I went in to talk to him about the boys coming the next week. Orson was at a point where he wanted to die. He was suffering a great deal of pain, but the next week, he was out of bed, in his wheel chair and dressed—suspenders and cap donned, he spoke slowly and whisperingly despite the oxygen tank. One week after the interview process, Orson died. Tami, a former student who worked at the nursing home, told me later that those boys' visits to Orson had done so much for him. Their visit had given him a reason to live just a little while longer. He had a story to give. How lucky we are. He had lived a remarkable life.

There were other celebrations, too. The students honed their writing and communication skills. The professional scholars brought in a great base of knowledge that one teacher, me, could not have contributed. The cross-curricular focus of this project — the history, the art, the computers—was also an achievement.

We also feel a sense of accomplishment and authenticity in publishing *Elderly Voices—Living Links to the Past* in both hard copy and electronic versions. But we celebrate most what we learned: love, compassion, patience, history, dignity, and a sense of our own mortality.

Living Links

Lately, because of our intense involvement with the elderly, I've found myself turning to the obituary page. I've grown a good amount of respect for those who work in nursing homes. I know when I say good-bye to my charges, they are at the beginning of their lives; it is a melancholy but extremely exciting time, full of boundless possibilities. For those working in a nursing home, saying good-bye means just that.

That is the only sorrow of this project; these special human beings who were so gracious to give us their stories are at the close of their lives. We have already said good-bye to Orson, Neal, Merna, Charlotte, John F., Rudy, John E., and Bus. I talk to my students about their deaths and we share that sadness, but we express our happiness that we have their wonderful stories. We can look back and feel, as Cometa says in her story, "I stop to look back on it, and I think I had a pretty good life. I think I did." And as her student interviewers ended the piece, "Well, we think so, too."

Earlier the students had greeted the residents with the question, "Do you remember me?" With the publication of *Living Links*, the voices of these residents will be heard for many generations. As they ask, "Do you remember *me*," our answer is yes, and with great affection.

From "Charlotte Killion"
by David Tonniges and Nick Kliewer

Some of the stories she told us were funny, and we enjoyed all of them. One of the stories told of how she and her husband went to town to buy their first tractor, and when they came home, her husband went to park the tractor in the barn. He didn't know how it worked too well, and he hollered "Whoa," but the tractor didn't stop, and it went right through the back of the barn not stopping until it finally hit a tree and died.

From "Eveleen Callies"
by Jessica Medinger and Jessica Davis

Eveleen tried to get any job that was available, so she found a job in a bank, her main job was being a bank teller. ... The Dillenger Gang, led by John Dillenger, came into the bank, setting out to rob it. Some of the gang members had already "cased the joint" by coming into the bank and the surrounding businesses a few days earlier and asked some questions. One of the businesses adjacent to the bank was the Western Union where Eveleen's husband worked. Eveleen's husband accommodated their questions with very accurate answers, of course. He didn't know who they were.

The Dillenger Gang then proceded to rob the bank. When they entered the bank, there was an older couple who were the janitors. They were told to get down on the floor, but the woman said, "Oh, I can't; I have rheumatism!" The gangster pointed the gun at her and said, "O.K. grandma ... sit over there!" Following orders, she did it only to say later that it was the scariest moment of her life.

Resources Useful to Teachers
Undertaking Oral History Projects

Aurora High School Juniors Oral History Project. http://www.esu9.k12.ne.us/~aurora/english/elderly2.html

Oral History Association. http://www.baylor.edu/~OHA/

Oral Family Histories: **The Women's Perspective.** http://www.luhsd.k12.ca.us/library/oral.html

Oral History Questions. http://www.cms.ccsd.k12.co.us/SONY/orbeta1/mrshuyck.html

Sample Oral History. http://www.cms.ccsd.k12.co.us/SONY/orbeta1/mrshuyck.html

Sitton, Thad, and George L. Mehaffey and O.L. Davis, Jr. (1983). *Oral History: A Guide for Teachers (and others).* Austin: University of Texas Press.

Your family.com. http://www.yourfamily.com/histories.html

This project was funded by the Nebraska Writing Project, the Nebraska Humanities Council and the Nebraska Arts Council and involved the Aurora, Henderson, and Geneva school districts in Nebraska. Cathie English's class interviewed residents of the Hamilton Manor in Aurora as well as the Memorial Community Care home.

Cathie English is an English teacher at Aurora High School and a teacher consultant with the Nebraska Writing Project.

From "Mabel Cantrell"
by Ben Brill and Clark Mitchell

Mabel remembered one time when she had a bad experience when she was working in a cafe out of state. ...Little did she know it, but her boss was a pervert. He would stand behind the uniforms in the girls' changing rooms and watch while unsuspecting waitresses came in to change. On a few occasions, he would jump out and grab a girl while she was changing. When Mabel came in to change, she happened to notice his feet behind the uniforms. At that moment, she angrily threw down her work paraphernalia and left. She never went back either; she didn't ever want to see that man again!

Teacherless Talk:

Impressions from Electronic Literary Conversations

by

ELAINE WARE AND KAREN MURAR

◆

Dear Dave, Mary, Melissa, and anyone else who might be watching over your shoulder (unbeknownst to you, of course.)

Well, we were all just sitting around here twiddling our thumbs, and we realized that we all had this uncontrollable urge to email each and every one of you! At present, we don't feel like delving deep into August Wilson's Fences ... so we won't. What we will do is tell you a little bit about ourselves, do a little dance, and make a little noise. Can you feel the beat? OK, well, I guess as I'm typing all these ramblings at present, I will go first. My name is Barry, and I am 16 years old (ain't life grand?) and I am 5 foot 9, have brown hair, and have no visible scars. I enjoy playing chess, basketball, and street hockey (even though that particular sport has drawn more of my blood than any hospital will do prior to my death.) I can't think of too much else to tell you right now, so I will now turn the keyboard over to John, mad accomplice that he is ...

Hello, I'm John. Aren't these icebreakers strange? Well, I'm older than Barry (though not by much) and taller (by a lot). I have some small visible scars. I like Star Wars and Jack Kerouac and oh yeah, comics too. Also of interest, Barry and I both work on a fanzine. It's pretty cool.

Well, folks (hey, it's Barry again . . .) that's about all there is for now, so I suppose we shall retire for the evening. You folks take care, and drive safely...

— Barry and John

Hi Barry and John! I'm Melissa, but I'm sure that came up across the top of this email. I'm an art major here at IUP. Specifically, my major is Graphic Design. Sorry I didn't get back to you sooner, but this is a very busy week for me. I have a Humanities Lit test at 8 am tomorrow. Then, I have a huge Geography test on Friday. I studied for about three hours tonight. Well, I'm 5'6" (the last time I looked at my driver's license anyway) and I enjoy, well that's a tough thing to say. I work 2 jobs. Between classes, I work at Housing and Residence Life here on campus; then I work at the Ice Center on the weekends. And with being an art major, I don't have much free time. Well, I'd better go, it's 12:09 am and I have a long day tomorrow on campus. Feel free to email me whenever you want. I check my email everyday, except I slack a little on the weekends with it. Talk to you later.

—Melissa

With voices as distinctive as these, juniors at Gateway High School and introductory literature sophomores at Indiana University of Pennsylvania began an email collaboration to discuss August Wilson's *Fences*, a play set in Pittsburgh in the late 1950s that focuses on the social and familial barriers experienced by the African-American protagonist, Troy Maxson. We met while participating in the Western Pennsylvania Writing Project, where we developed the idea for bridging the two schools to make students feel that they were part of a wider community of readers and writers. email empowered students to analyze literature through cooperative peer dialogues.

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The Cast

Gateway High School Juniors
Barry, Carol, Danielle, Derek, Faith, Jan, Jane, Jarad, Jeff, Jessica, John, Jordan, Kathy, Kelly, , Megan, Patsy, Rochelle, Roxann, Sandra, Tricia, Selma, Surinder, Vincent

Indiana University of Pennsylvania Sophomores
Amy, April, Beverly, Brad, Candace, Celia, Dave, Jason, Julie, Linda, Mary, Melissa, Michelle, Nadine, Pete, Samuel, Sharri, Susan, Sylvia

Comparing curricula before the start of the new school year, we found both of us planned to teach the August Wilson play. We incorporated specific dates for the project into each of our academic calendars.

Other details needed to be worked out. The high school students did not have school access to email; therefore, students who lived in the same area formed teams, receiving parental permission to use home computers. College students had email access at four campus computer labs. A master list of email addresses was then compiled. (We suggest that teachers initially test the email addresses to ensure that connections can be made.) Our project established that a minimum of three exchanges of email correspondence take place within two weeks. Rather than the typical teacher-led discussion, the project fostered student-generated conversation minus teacher facilitation. Students analyzed other literary pieces in class while they independently worked outside of class on the email project. Formal class discussion of the play did not occur until after students completed all email correspondence. However, as teachers we functioned as troubleshooters when students made us aware of any problems they encountered with technology. Although we established the literary and technological framework, the literary conversations centered on student ideas rather than teacher instruction. Students were encouraged to write about anything they found interesting in the play.

Since the teachers were not the primary audience, students adapted their language and use of email technology to suit peers. Once the icebreakers established personal connections, students entered a language comfort zone, one much more akin to spoken conversation than to standard academic writing. Many students actually referred to their online communication as "talk." The college students tended to be spontaneous communicators, composing online while the high school students first wrote individual reactions to the play in a dialectical journal and then further developed the interpretations in their emails. The student literary conversations that resulted—without teacher intervention—displayed the reading strategies teachers strive to achieve in the classroom, namely, predicting, questioning, clarifying, connecting, interpreting, and evaluating.

Predicting

Our students' predictions of the outcomes of Wilson's play were the result of close reading rather than haphazard guessing. Their predictions also revealed our students' knowledge of plot patterns, consistent characterizations, and social dynamics. Jason, for instance, in his first email forecasted an important role for the character Troy:

> *I believe that in Fences Troy will be the character that we will want to follow and pay attention to. He sees the world as it was when he played baseball. He still has an open wound about how he was cheated out of money and how he was viewed as lower class because he is black. We see his inability to deal with the reality that the world is changing and that the black man is now starting to have equal rights and opportunities. We see this attitude when Troy and Rose discuss the future of Cory. Cory has Troy's athletic ability and has the potential of becoming a great ball player .... Troy's attitude is something that I believe we will want to trace and keep track of. He might change and let Cory try out for football or choose to not see the world as an ever changing and evolving place.*

Predictions, a component of problem-solving, also served to motivate student reading, as illustrated in Amy's email: "The character that will really get hurt in the play is Cory. He has a chance to become something and Troy is trying to stop him. There seems to be resentment between Troy and Cory due to the fact that Cory has a chance that Troy never had. I am interested in getting right on to the next act so that I can see the continuation of this little saga." Not all students clearly articulated the evidence upon which they based their predictions as did Jason and Amy, but others were quite adept at internalizing clues that might foreshadow later events in the play as did

Jessica, Rochelle, and Jane when they closed an email by asking, "Is something going on between Troy and that Alberta chick? Just wondering. Adios!"

Since the teachers were not the primary audience, students adapted their language and use of email technology to suit peers.

Questioning

Most students believe that asking questions suggests a vulnerability or lack of intelligence. In most classrooms, the teachers ask the questions, usually not a recipe for a real conversation. Student email questions, however, circumvent the need for teacher-centered questioning. Students engage in honest question-and-answer dialogue with a small group in a supportive social milieu. Email promotes risk-taking as students experience the metamorphic process of shaping ideas through dialogue. Megan and her team experienced freedom to admit a lack of understanding when they asked Julie and Brad:

> *What do you think Gabe symbolizes in the play? We can't seem to figure out the purpose of him being there. He says all those weird things like blowing the horn when it's time for judgment, and Lyons king of the jungle. We know it's important, but we don't know why or how.*

The freedom to question also frees students to explore alternative answers. At first students seemed cautious about their own insights, but confidence grew as they explored each others' ideas. They were liberated to dig deeply, without thinking they must have all the answers. Real learning is, after all, the posing of a question and the search for an answer.

In our email collaboration, students employed questioning as an invitation. As Celia wrote to Kathy and Faith: "How do you feel about Troy and the way he treats his family? Do you think he treats Rose with respect? Is he a loving father and husband? What are your thoughts on Lyons and how he is always borrowing money from Troy?" Such questioning promoted the conversational quality of dialogue where it is flattering to be asked "What do YOU think?"

Clarifying

As students conversed, they engaged in many clarifying strategies. Specific textual references and quotations often supported and illuminated their assertions. While many students realized the need to explain and support their statements, others learned this lesson from their email partners who requested clarification, such as Nadine who wrote to Jan and Selma, "I didn't understand what you were getting at with Troy's fight against discrimination. In your next response, could you go into further detail?" When the students replied to Nadine, they explained, "You mentioned that you didn't understand Troy's fight against discrimination at his level. Basically, we mean that Troy is not a Civil Rights activist or anything, but attempts to fight against the discrimination in the society around him that affect him, like his workplace and baseball." In the classroom students might become defensive when asked to clarify their statements, but in the context of email, students accepted such requests as a normal part of interpersonal communication.

Connecting

Email provided students opportunities to connect literature to their lives, knowledge, and opinions as they might in ordinary conversation. Dave wrote to Roxann and Danielle that "Fences is starting out to be a very interesting play because of the native setting in Pittsburgh. That got my interest right off the bat." Wilson's references to specific places that students knew firsthand energized their attitude toward the entire project.

The baseball references in Wilson's play inspired historical connections as students discussed prejudice issues. Beverly shared with Patsy and Jarad that she

> *thought there was a deep-rooted prejudice towards white people and vice versa throughout the play . . . . There is also much bitterness between Troy and the baseball league. I don't really know much about the negro baseball league so if you have any information you could pass down I would really appreciate it.*

Elements of the play motivated students to research the time period. Shared information about Satchel Page, Jackie Robinson, and Negro League teams like the local Homestead Grays expanded their understanding of points of conflict in the play. Vincent and Surinder commented:

...if blacks ever tried to challenge the inequities in sports, as well as all other aspects of African American life, they would greatly suffer. This brings up an important concept in the story: sports truly represented all aspects of life. The conflict in this story is not simply Cory's desire to play sports versus Troy's desire for him to acquire a secure job. Cory wants to challenge the discrimination prevalent in the time, whereas Troy truly cares for and wants to protect him from any danger that he may face in challenging that authority.

Jessica, Rochelle and Jane connected the microcosm of the play to the macrocosm of society with:

We felt that this also symbolized the slow progression of blacks through the 1950's and 60's. They didn't just all of a sudden break free of the cycle of prejudice and segregation, but made small improvements one step at a time over the generations.

Kelly, Carol, and Jordan reflected on the importance of such sharing:

Samuel, thanks for telling us some historical information about the time period the play was written in. It gave us a broader view of the play by helping us look at the events of the play in connection with the events going on in the world at the time.

The students also vicariously related to characters and contemplated their own values, peppering the correspondence with gender connections. One young man, Pete, empathized:

The story was really good I thought. I felt bad for Cory .... I am sort of like him in athletics and I would have wanted the chance to go on and further my education and do what I have fun doing too.

The women reacted strongly to Rose's actions as a 1950's woman and the sexual stereotyping regarding her role. Sylvia believed that "Troy was way out of line when he expected Rose to handle the 'other woman' thing just fine and be rational about it ... I know that I wouldn't be." Tricia's enthusiastic sanction "Go Rose!" resulted in Melissa's response:

I agree with Tricia ... I'd be so disgusted ... I couldn't bring myself to talk to him either .... I was shocked when Troy asked Rose to raise the baby with him. ... I don't get the impression men ever even thought about helping with a baby back in those days.

Kathy and Faith also reacted to the gender issue:

He treats his wife like a possession. Although it coincides with the attitudes of the time, it should not be an excuse. He cares about her but thinks of her as an inferior. He calls her 'my woman,' a very sexual comment. Similar sexual comments demonstrated a lack of respect for her.

Student email included literary connections as well. Sandra, whose first language is Spanish, compared Troy's friend, Bono, to "Don Quixote's Sancho Panza, his . . . sidekick who supports Troy's drinking and laughs at Troy's stupid jokes." Brad made another parallel: "The father-son relationship in Fences is almost exactly the same as the father-son relationship in Death of a Salesman because both sons are unemployed, lazy, and immature for their ages." Understanding family relationships in *Death of a Salesman* also served Dave in understanding family relationships in *Fences* when he proposed:

In the classroom students might become defensive when asked to clarify their statements, but in the context of email, students accepted such requests as a normal part of interpersonal communication.

In Death the boys were raised full of hot air, to think they were perfect and better than anyone else, that they were always going to be top dogs. In Fences, it is clearly the opposite. Troy tries to teach his boys a hard work ethic . . . he discourages Lyons constantly for playing music and tells him to get a REAL job ... Troy also discourages Cory...

Melissa explored the same link:

I also think Lyons is a lot like Biff in Death. Did you guys ever read that? Well, in case you didn't Biff is a man in his late 20s, early 30s, who doesn't know what to do with his life. He bounces from job to job, never

really amounting to anything. Lyons reminds me of this because his only job seems to be playing in that band at the bars.

Other students related their knowledge of television genres to their reading of the play. Three female high school students wrote:

The second act of Fences seemed like a soap opera. Troy was having a child with another woman while sill living with Rose. Cory gets into a fight with Troy and leaves home. Troy dies.

Two other high school juniors wrote, "Act I seemed very tranquil to the almost soap-opera like Act 2." Making such connections resulted in the students' own valuable contributions to the dynamic literary conversation.

Interpreting

Students' freedom to choose their topics for discussion led to rather fluent and creative interpretations of Wilson's characters, symbols, and theme rather than the sometimes mechanical and stilted literary analyses students produce in formal papers. Whereas students in the traditional classroom feel the need to prove that they have read the selection and understand the terminology by regaling the teacher with plot summaries and technical definitions, email frees them to share their interpretations and naturally apply literary terms as they communicate. The following exchanges illustrate student focus on characterization in Fences—in this case an analysis of a particularly enigmatic Gabriel who has a metal plate in his head as a result of a World War II injury:

Hi guys! It's us again. We're ready to start our second analysis of Fences. Let's start with an overview of Gabriel's character. We think it would be safe to assume that Gabe is comic relief. For example, when Troy told Rose about his affair, Gabe entered the scene. The scene was extremely tense, but Gabe added a distraction that allowed the reader to have an aesthetic distance from that very serious conversation. Gabe asked silly questions such as, 'Are you mad at me Troy?' These questions seemed so out of place in the midst of the conversation taking place. ... We can't believe what Troy did to Gabe!!! How far will Troy go for Gabe's money?

—Danielle and Roxann

Dear Danielle and Roxann,
Hi again. . . . I agree with what you said about Gabe. Troy committed him for the money. The way he treated him was wrong. I think Gabe needed Troy's love and Troy ends up contradicting himself. He says he needs to be free but Gabe ends up locked up. That was wrong...

—Candace

Whereas students in the traditional classroom feel the need to prove that they have read the selection and understand the terminology by regaling the teacher with plot summaries and technical definitions, email frees them to share their interpretations and naturally apply literary terms as they communicate.

Most students discussed the motivations and psychological problems of the main characters. In addition, without being given specific instructions to apply critical theories, students experimented with feminist readings of the husband and wife relationship, Marxist inquiries into the economics of the manual labor force, New Critical interpretations of theme and imagery, New Historical investigations into the Negro and National Baseball Leagues, as well as other approaches, thus bringing multiple perspectives to the play.

Building on the literary concepts learned in the classroom, students quite willingly took risks when presenting their ideas. Only occasionally did a student indicate insecurity about an interpretation with a statement such as Michelle's, "Boy, did I have to dig deep for that one. I hope you have not lost all faith in my intelligence." More often students saw their exchanges as chances to work together, to interpret together, as Linda expressed when she wrote:

If either of you have more questions, feel free to email me anytime. You don't have to wait until you have your whole response. By doing this it might help all of us to better understand this play.

Collaboration was evident as our students socially constructed the meanings of the text during the give and take of email interpretations.

Students not only eagerly shared their analyses, but frequently requested feedback about the plausibility of their interpretations when they asked, "Do you agree with the points I have made?" or remarked, "Well, let me know what you think of my response." Inviting constructive criticism revealed that students were willing to consider the opinions and evidence of other students in their ongoing analysis of Wilson's play. Jeff and Derek illustrated this when they commented to Sharri:

> *Jeff and I will look at what you've said and add it to our insight of Fences. You have some pretty interesting stuff written down and I'll take it into consideration.*

Evaluating

Responding to interpretations naturally led to peer evaluations. Students often saw their views mirrored back in different words, thus validating their original ideas. Such agreements often resulted in elaboration that strengthened an interpretation. Here, for example, is Nadine introducing her interpretation of fence as symbol:

> *I think that [fences] represents something different for each member of the family. Rose wants her husband and son to work together and build a fence around their house. Troy and Cory, on the other hand, are putting off building this fence. I believe that Troy doesn't want the fence because he will feel caged in like prison...*

Jan and Selma reply to Nadine:

> *We agree with you about the symbolic title. In addition, we have found Fences to symbolize the way that Troy has built up barriers against expressing emotions and/or feeling the pain around him.*

While agreement and elaboration were most common, students did feel free to interpret the text from multiple perspectives that sometimes led to disagreement. Disagreements developed students' critical thinking skills because they had to reconsider the text and pull out more persuasive evidence. Students also developed tact and diplomacy, despite their opposing viewpoints, as Jason illustrated in his response to Jeff and Derek:

> *Now about the part of showing us social classes that I read in your last email, I find that if in fact the author wanted to give us a taste of social structure and classes, he would have done it differently. I am no analyst so don't take my words as law or what is right. I have been wrong before. I think though if he wanted to get across the social classes and how the different classes were treated he would of given us another family or neighborhood to compare the social conditions with. I just don't see this happening. He concentrates on this one family and their troubles which brings me to believe that the main theme is embedded within the family and how it operates or how it is dysfunctional. The conflict between Troy and his children support the idea of family related crisis and hardships.*

Students saw their exchanges as chances to work together, to interpret together...

Conclusion

The email project socially liberated our students from constraints that tend to stifle individuals in usual class interactions. Students who might usually hesitate to be active discussion participants, experienced a lack of self-consciousness in email and a motivating comfort level. Some of our students, however, were novice email users who felt frustrated by the new writing experience as Susan explained:

> *I felt that the total atmosphere of trying to sort through my thoughts in a computer lab was very wrong for me. I would be thinking about what I wanted to write, and all of a sudden, something would go wrong with the system, or my screen would do something weird, or anything else that could possibly go wrong. I can't work with distractions, and when I'm forced to, my work suffers.*

Certainly teachers as well as students are in a period of transition as they learn to use email to expand the classroom. Until computer classrooms

with email access are routinely available in all schools, teachers will receive mixed feedback about email projects as April illustrated:

> *In general, the whole email idea is good. It forces people to learn how to do it and it keeps communication lines open. The biggest problem was availability of computers. If you live off campus and don't have a hook up at home, it can be an annoying challenge.*

While a few students expressed reluctance, others, like Brad, acknowledged the possibilities such technology now offers:

> *The mind-boggling innovation of email has gone far beyond what I had originally thought it would turn out to be. Here I am, now, giving my assessment of computer communications, when apparently it was yesterday that I sat in my grade school class learning how to 'load' on an old green screen Apple computer. I couldn't even imagine back then that technology would lead to this.*

For most, bridging the two schools birthed an excitement for addressing a new audience, an audience that did not prejudge the writer. Most students responded enthusiastically:

> *These email sessions are very helpful in deeply delving into the story because they make us analyze not only our views on the play, but also the views of three other people. It really feels like we know the characters because of all this analysis and we have such strong feelings towards them.*
>
> —Danielle and Roxann

> *Melissa seems to have opened up a good dialogue between the three of us and the students from IUP. She's brought up many good points from Fences and showed us a different way to think about some points from the story. It was interesting.*
>
> —Barry, John, Tricia

Imagination coupled with today's ever-expanding technology offers unlimited possibilities for improving our classrooms. Students can now converse without time and distance restraints. Networking students and teachers across states and even countries can make the classroom one of the most exciting places to be. As Barry, John and Tricia concluded, "Hoorah Hoorah for email!"

Elaine Ware has taught college writing and literature for twenty years. Currently teaching at Indiana University of Pennsylvania, Indiana, Pennsylvania, she is a TC with the South Central Pennsylvania Writing Project.

Karen Murar has taught secondary English for twenty-five years at Gateway High School, Monroeville, Pennsylvania.

Both Elaine and Karen are TCs with the Western Pennsylvania Writing Project.

Book Reviews

The Literacy Crisis: False Claims, Real Solutions

by JEFF MCQUILLAN

Portsmouth, NH, Heinemann, 1998.
$15.00; 109 pages

◆

Reviewed by JANET A. ISENHOUR

Janet A. Isenhour is co-director of the Bluegrass Writing Project at the University of Kentucky and executive director of The Carnegie Center for Literacy and Learning in Lexington, Kentucky.

Before you begin reading Jeff McQuillan's book, take a few minutes to do some writing. Think back to your own early attempts toward becoming a literate person or think about the students you teach and their literacy successes and challenges.

You'll need this real-world grounding before you tackle McQuillan's book, which in 109 pages of text surveys 275 literacy studies of the last 30 years. McQuillan covers this minefield in seven dense chapters. He begins by exploding popular myths about the so-called literacy crisis in this country. According to McQuillan's interpretation of the research, reading achievement in the U.S. over the last 25 years has not declined, and California's supposed drop in test scores is not attributable to whole language instruction.

Subsequent chapters examine the research related to other literacy questions:

What does it take to learn how to read? To get the alphabetic principle? What is the relationship between age and reading? Between sound and reading? How do context and eye movement affect reading ability?

McQuillan's underlying assumptions about reading are based on models of language acquisition formulated by Ken and Yetta Goodman and Frank Smith: reading development is a result of understanding meaningful written language. McQuillan expands the Goodman-Smith model to include two more factors which can help us understand differences in reading ability. These factors include the access we have to reading materials and the types of external assistance we receive in helping us understand written messages.

McQuillan distinguishes two types of external assistance: metalinguistic and elaborative. Metalinguistic assistance includes formal instruction in reading (phonics instruction is one such form), while elaborative assistance includes all forms of instruction other than those related to the language system's structure. Elaborative assistance might be provided, for example, by someone who gives background information for a story or explains the meaning of some words. McQuillan asserts that the ability to read comes primarily from exposure to comprehensible text with appropriate elaborative assistance, even in the absence of explicit metalinguistic instruction.

McQuillan's ultimate conclusion is that becoming a successful reader depends in large measure on access to print materials. "The availability of books to read — and the subsequent amount of reading done," he writes, "appears to be as critical, and certainly no less so, in determining success in reading as classroom instructional methods." It's hard to argue with such a conclusion, especially if you've been thinking back to your own early literacy experiences. You may remember, as I do, a print-rich environment in which unlimited trips to the library and an endless supply of bedside paperbacks

saved you from stacks of sight-word cards and the dreary basal-reader world of Alice and Jerry and Jip.

You may remember, as I do, a print-rich environment in which unlimited trips to the library and an endless supply of bedside paperbacks saved you from stacks of sight-word cards and the dreary basal-reader world of Alice and Jerry and Jip.

One of the endorsements on the book cover haunts me. Jim Trelease, author of *The Read Aloud Handbook*, warns, "McQuillan offers all the evidence needed to stop the silly reading wars, if the generals will only READ IT." I came away fearful that the generals — such folks as legislators and policymakers — won't read this book. That puts pressure on the rest of us to deliver the message to headquarters. McQuillan has surveyed the battlefield and organized and summarized the information. Now it's up to us to see that it gets into the right hands.

Narration as Knowledge: Tales of the Teaching Life

Edited by JOSEPH F. TRIMMER

Portsmouth, NH, Heinemann, 1998.
$26.00; 256 pages

◆

Reviewed by DON ROTHMAN

Don Rothman is director of the Central California Writing Project at U.C. Santa Cruz

I remember my students by the stories they tell, not by their names I briefly learn ... —Kim Stafford

The more I remember my own adolescence, the more I watch the world through the eyes of my own teenage daughters, the more I read about mental and physical illness, violence, and tragic loss...the less I wonder why so many first-year students choose, first, to write about death, disease, and dysfunction and, second, to repress in the end what they have just written. In fact, I've grown so used to these essays that my question is no longer 'Why do they write about these things?' but 'How could they not write about them?' —Lad Tobin

The writer in me knows that to tell celebratory stories as I have just done is to tell half-truths only. To tell better stories, I need to uncover the ordinary along with the exceptional, the dark along with the light, and admit to complications in my narrative. —Toby Fulwiler

I've tried to write this story several times during the thirty years since Dane and I shared a year together, each time attempting to lead up, as I thought fine narrative should, to moments of joy and lamentation, a moral to the story—potent and ripe with possibility—of lessons learned and those unspoken. What I found instead was that the story could not be tamed—one story led to others and each one singly was demonstrably incoherent and irrational. ...You can't cage memory neatly into words or form. —Ruth Vinz

I tell them that I am often blinded by my own history. I ask them if they are blinded by theirs. —Lilian Bridwell-Bowles

In a significant way the credibility of the course rests on how I behave.... Unless all the students sitting around the table are involved in the process of meaning making, what good does it do to tout the virtues of a participatory pedagogy? —John Clifford

I go to the classroom for connection. I can even say, for love. —Wendy Bishop

Teaching stories beget teaching stories. When I started teaching thirty years ago, I was reading and admiring Giordano Bruno. Perhaps that is why he is on my mind after reading this exciting collection. When the eccentric Bruno visited England at the end of the 16th century, he lectured on the art of memory and on the coincidence of contraries. For memory, he relied on the ancient technique of imagining a familiar physical place, filling it with familiar objects, and attaching new information that one wanted to remember to those objects. He constructed these theaters of the mind, as Frances Yates calls them, to give knowledge a habitation and a place. The coincidence of contraries has both religious and epistemological underpinnings, pointing to our amphibious capacity to live our limited terrestrial lives and, simultaneously, to aspire to a spiritual transcendence. At any given moment, we know and don't know.

Memory and contraries are major themes in this remarkably good collection of nineteen essays and stories about the inner life of teaching by humane and courageous college writing and literature teachers.

Editor Joseph Trimmer introduces these personal, professional narratives by suggesting that the authors included here are challenging current intellectual paradigms by reclaiming the power of stories to apprehend and represent their worlds. Rather than removing themselves from their classrooms in order to write about educational issues, these teachers invite us into their evocative disappointments, successes, and frustrations. They offer vividly described landscapes of the mind and guide us through the inevitable hypocrisies, moral and emotional doubts and dilemmas, and profound, albeit short-lived, ecstasies of teaching. Their classes are "sites where stories happen," as Michael Martone writes. These essays, Trimmer notes, "are not written in the privileged forms of academic discourse" where certainty prevails. They are, however, composed by college and university faculty secure enough to expose their teaching confusions, failures, and moral lapses, apparently without fear of being fired. (Bruno was lured back to Italy by the Inquisition and burned at the stake as a heretic for what he wrote.) Fearless, the authors of these pieces resist describing themselves as heroes or martyrs, leaving us, instead, with provocative narratives about the aesthetic, emotional, moral and political dimensions of teaching.

I'll single out one particularly brilliant essay, Sondra Perl's "Facing the Other: The Emergence of Ethics and Selfhood in a Cross-Cultural Writing Classroom." Perl describes leading a course in Austria for teachers, carrying with her deep questions about what she is doing in a country so stained by the Holocaust. Perl uses teachers' inability to write and her own reluctance to talk about her nagging moral and emotional issues, to cross a boundary, to move beyond paralysis. In a small response group she opens up. Members of the group encourage her to bring her questions to the larger group, where through writing and honest conversation they recognize the "unusual opportunity...to approach these questions with care and respect and see what occurs." "We have a chance," Perl says, "to speak across cultures" (p. 183).

One of the teachers writes a letter to Louise Rosenblatt, noticing that *Literature as Exploration* was written in 1938, "one of the darkest years of Austrian history" (p. 187). Reflecting on this, Perl writes, "Teaching is always so surprising to me.... It took Gerlinde's observation and her imaginative reaching out across time and space, in writing, to remind me again how soil, the terrain we stand on, the land we inhabit, alters the way we read and write and changes the meaning we make" (p. 187).

At the end of the course, Margret, another student, writes, "With you I have learned that some people are willing to look closer even if it seems impossible to bear doing so. Thus others get the chance to learn" (p. 189).

Perl's essay, like almost all the others in this book, invites us to explore our teacher memories. In the act of writing from and within these theaters of the mind, we may discover aesthetic and moral dimensions of our work that deserve our attention and evoke our awe. We're also sure to discover, if we're as honest as these writers, the coincidence of contraries that leaves us, variously, close to despair and humbly enlightened. These essays honor our profession in deeply personal and potentially political ways, not least of which is by trusting reader-colleagues with such evocative prose.

The Art of Workplace English: A Curriculum for All Students

by CAROLYN BOIARSKY

Portsmouth, NH, Boynton/Cook, 1997.
$23.50; 176 pages

◆

Reviewed by ANN DOBIE

Ann Dobie is the director of the NWP of Acadiana at University of Southwestern Louisiana.

I must admit, with some embarrassment, that a few years ago I probably would not have chosen to review a book with a title that used the term "workplace English." What did it have to say to those of us teaching college prep or university courses? A few months ago, however, two matters conspired to attract my attention to Carolyn Boiarsky's slim volume from Heinemann, and I am glad they did. First, the word *art* with *workplace English* seemed to me to be an intriguing combination. Did they belong in the same breath, much less a title? Second, I had become aware of the growing number of school-to-work programs operating throughout the country. What, I wondered, did their growing presence mean for traditional curricula and teaching practice?

Boiarsky quickly convinced me that "yes" was the answer to my first question, and that the answer to the second is not as revolutionary is it might initially seem. In what she describes as "a humane book," she argues for new curricula and teaching methods that will prepare students for the world of the 21st century without sacrificing the learning that has traditionally been deemed to be essential. She also aspires to make the English classroom more rewarding and enjoyable for both teachers and students. No small task, that.

Defined as "the form of communication we use outside the academic classroom" (p. 17), workplace English includes "reading, understanding, interpreting, and evaluating information in technical and scientific fields as well as communicating information about these fields" (p. 18). It also recognizes the importance of visualization (layout and graphics), oral communication, and technology. Since these are important skills for any contemporary student, what is the difference between workplace English and the traditional classroom? According to Boiarsky "in an applied English course, students have an opportunity to see how the grammar they're learning, the literature they're reading, and the papers they're writing relate to the real world" (p. 19).

How is a teacher to manage all this? Concerned about the post-academic success of all students, but particularly about that of underachieving students who routinely drop out of school or perform at minimal levels, Boiarsky advocates, in addition to some traditional methods, varying teaching methods to match students' learning styles and focusing on content relevant to their lives. She speaks of providing a scaffold for students to climb and teaching within a realistic context. She reaches back to the theories of John Dewey to recommend a "hands-on, project-oriented approach that is contextually based rather than abstract, and that extends beyond the presentation of theories and abstractions to include the 'whys and what fors'" (p. 16). Such projects can involve the competencies named by the Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills as the ones workers will need to succeed in the economy of the coming century: thinking, problem solving, decision making, self-management, creativity.

It is in what she suggests should be taught rather than how it is to be taught that Boiarsky may ruffle the most feathers among her colleagues. In her discussion of expanding the traditional genres she adds some that teachers may have reservations about including—i.e., the five major genres of workplace literature: correspondence, instructions, reports, proposals, and oral presentations.

How is a teacher to manage all of this? According to Boiarsky, the time has come for a review of the curriculum. Do we need to teach all the aspects of literature? Can we reduce the time spent on various texts? Where is there overlap and redundancy in our materials? With careful revision, she argues, there is room for the study of workplace English along with more traditional texts. The final chapter presents a case for collaboration across disciplines to integrate the curriculum, interweaving disciplines in meaningful and effective ways. Pushing even further, she calls for collaboration not only with students and other teachers, but also with members of business and industry.

In short, *The Art of Workplace English* is a book whose time has come. Although the chapter on technology is less successful than the rest, providing little that is new in the discussion since the subject is quickly dated, in general the book offers a sound approach to preparing students for the world they will enter after they leave school. It will be directly helpful to high school teachers and community college teachers, but it also has much to say to those of us who are working with college prep and college students. After all, everybody is in the workplace sooner or later.

The Book of Learning and Forgetting

by FRANK SMITH

New York: Teacher's College Press, 1998.

$17.95; 144 pages

◆

Reviewed by BOB SIZOO

Bob Sizoo is co-director of the Redwood Writing Project at California State University at Humboldt.

In early July, eighteen Redwood Writing Project fellows read Frank Smith's latest book, *The Book of Learning and Forgetting*. Exhausted by the battle against simplistic notions of education that seem to dominate current public discourse, we were unanimously recharged reading the views of a cognitive psychologist.

Smith characterizes the Classic view of learning as one that is effortless, continual, independent of rewards and punishments, a social activity, unpremeditated, vicarious, and never forgotten. He contrasts this with what he calls "The Official Theory," which views learning as hard work, occasional, dependent on rewards and punishment, individualistic, intentional, and easily forgotten. Classic Learning is growth; the Official Theory is memorization.

Though learning is often viewed by parents, lawmakers, administrators, and yes, teachers, as primarily an intellectual activity, Smith views learning through a more Vygotskian lens, that "you learn from the company you keep." Parents demonstrate that they know this by their concern for their children's peer group. He has "never heard a parent say, 'I'm not worried about the gang my son goes with — he's a slow learner.'"

Smith refers to communities of influential people as "clubs." Unless we experience severe childhood trauma, we all join the spoken language club. Throughout our lives, we readily identify with and continually learn from members of the other clubs to which we are welcomed. "We become who we are from the company we keep and from the company we shun or which shuns us." Smith challenges us to question why some students are shunned from the written language club, and reflects on the historical roots of public education's role as club admissions officer.

The industrial revolution brought production-driven, efficiency-oriented schools based on the

model of "the mightiest fighting machine in Europe, the Prussian army." We still use terms from that era: we "recruit" teachers, give a "battery' of tests, teach word "attack" skills, "drill" students, and fight the Literacy "War." This student-as-manufactured-good model set the stage for a new official theory about human learning. Rather than turn to anthropology, literature, or even farming, all of which had well-established theories of learning and/or nurturing (but lacked the "identifiable, easily quantifiable unit"), education turned to psychology. Smith's career-long dispute with behaviorists is evident in his depiction of scientists in lab coats with stopwatches, and his discussion of Ebbinghaus's experimentation with nonsense syllables and the resulting learning curve. Two major problems face one who relies too heavily on the Ebbinghaus work to form a theory of learning: the theory is entirely based on learning nonsense, and the learning curve is coupled with a corresponding, upside-down, mirror-image forgetting curve.

Smith compares the conflict between Classical Learning and the Official Theory of Learning and Forgetting to that between clinical and behavioral psychologists. "Aspects of psychology that could be counted and measured in some way became 'scientific' and academically respectable, while the rest was regarded as dubious and subjective, relegated to realms of 'clinical' or 'abnormal' psychology.... In education, matters involving human emotions have become the province of 'special education.' Students whose feelings interfere with their learning are regarded as 'handicapped' or 'at risk.'"

We read Smith with mixed feelings. *The Book of Learning and Forgetting* is an excellent piece of persuasive writing. Most of what he says hits home, but, as teachers in "the system," we're required to follow mandates that we may not agree with, and certainly do not fit into the Classical view of learning. How can we persevere in this ambiguous world? Surprisingly, Smith doesn't insist that the only solution is a complete overhaul of the system, but suggests small steps teachers can take to improve the situation. The final section, "Repairing the Damage," provides this direction. We recommend you read this thought-provoking book, and help us repair the damage.

Happy Problems

—continued from page 4

hearing the buzz of another's words, and being reminded that here, too, lies freedom. And classical music is not immune to such surprise. I once dozed fitfully through an entire live cantata, enjoying the lyric lines I half-heard, only to learn during the applause that the entire text had been in German -- the lines I "heard" in English I had invented: "Turn around and share my sleep." I had to feverishly try to write down the lines I got "wrong," because they belonged to me.

These minor examples point me in the direction of more profound "error" and greater magnitude of resulting discovery. As a child, for example, I apparently got several family stories wrong, lived with my own versions for forty years, and now stand in rich possession of personal myth: Jesus called my own relatives to fish a Nebraska lake during a great storm. I like that. And Uncle Miley, was he really struck by lightning after returning home on Valentine's Day from three years on the road? History happened. I write what I know, because my knowing is shaped by creative selection. "Error" may be the small door to the great realm: how we might live.

I realize now that another name for my father's "happy problems" is the "negative capability" of Keats, that ability to be "in uncertainties, mysteries and doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason" (Keats' letter to his brothers George and Tom, December 21, 1817). To not know, to be troubled, but not to anguish over this trouble — in fact, to relish it — this is the good luck of happy problems.

So go forth, embrace your happy problems of invention and creation. Mystery and difficulty are your greatest fortune.

Kim Stafford is director of the Oregon Writing Project at Lewis and Clark College in Portland, Oregon.

Letters to the Editor

In response to "Syntax at an Early Age: A Mother Challenges the Experts," by Natalie Kramer and "My Perspective," by Melanie Sperling, featured in the Spring 1998 *Quarterly:*

ONE THING THAT BOTHERED ME SOMEWHAT IS THAT DR. Sperling refutes my statements without the benefit of the experience with other educational systems. She doubts, for example, that "thousands of fifth graders" would find work on cumulative sentences as compelling as Alex does "working lovingly with his mom." What she does not realize is that millions of French children and hundreds of millions of Russian children (and these are the only ones that I have first hand knowledge of) do find it functionally useful (if not compelling). They do not all work lovingly with their moms. Alex, on the other hand, finds it just as compelling, if not more, working on material of this and higher level of difficulty with his Russian and his French teacher, to whom his mom gladly (if not lovingly) delegates the honors.

Natalie, Smokey, Motey, and Alex Kramer

I BELIEVE MANY PARENTS WOULD AGREE THAT EDUCATIONAL goals should be ... tangible, measurable and attainable with good programs and competent teaching.

Professor Sperling, on the other hand, seems to stress objectives that are vague or abstract, such as analytical and culturally astute thinking, taking one's place within different text-based communities, and the ability to adapt language according to communicative context. These objectives, it seems, are supposed to be attained by means even more obscure than the objectives themselves—intimacy with written language, lots of writing of different kinds, the appropriate context within which the learning takes place, etc. While some parents may be impressed by these fancy-sounding goals, many do not want to see their children's basic skills compromised because emphasis is placed on these obscure, intangible and difficult to define objectives.

I believe educators need to be aware of how out of touch the public finds some of them to be.

Marc E. Kronson
Rockville, MD.

ALEX'S STORY IS AN ALL-TOO FAMILIAR SCENARIO TO US AT THE Organization for Quality Education— struggling students who begin to thrive as soon as direct instruction is introduced. After all, students tend to get better at things when they are shown how to do them and get a chance to practice what they have been taught.

Malkin Dare
Organization for Quality Education
Waterloo, Ontario, Canada

IN THE RESPONSE GIVEN BY DR. SPERLING WE SEE AN ATTEMPT to undermine the reality put forth by Ms. Kramer using the jargon du jour....

I am baffled by comments such as "an intimacy with written language" and "text-based communities," used by Dr. Sperling in her response. I believe Natalie Kramer is talking about a great deal of hard work, practice, and repetition needed to acquire the skill of writing correctly. Ms. Kramer is not talking about some warm and fuzzy feelings and concepts involved in the very basic language learning process.

It is fortunate ... that the common sense argument put forth by Natalie Kramer cannot be diluted by all the massive and highly specialized literature surrounding the topic of language teaching and learning.

Dr. Naime Yaramanogulu
University of Maryland

Call for Manuscripts

We welcome lively, well-written articles on the writing process and on teaching writing, as well as articles on research in the teaching of it. The articles can take the form of personal experience or opinion, or can explore the work of others who have contributed to the field.

We are especially interested in articles by classroom teachers. If you have an idea you would like to develop, send a query letter or give us a call at 510-642-0976. Send ideas, drafts, and completed manuscripts to: The NWP Quarterly, *Graduate School of Education, 615 University Hall, University of California, Berkeley, CA 94720.*

— The Editors

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The Quarterly

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Fall 1998

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The Quarterly
OF THE NATIONAL WRITING PROJECT

Fall 1998 Volume 20, Number 4

Courage and Voice:
The Story of a Young Author and Her Teacher

by

JANE H. TALBERT

◆

Each of us has a story to tell, and it's my challenge as a writing teacher to help my students develop the courage and voice to tell their stories. Two years ago I was asked to work with a young miracle named Jessica Pace, to help her turn her inspirational story of struggle and survival into a published book. Throughout her short life, Jessica had continuously demonstrated that she had more than enough courage for this enormous undertaking, and through our months together, she developed a compelling voice that would be heard nationwide.

I first met fifteen-year-old Jessica about eight months after she'd endured a double lung and heart transplant. She'd also had back surgery to implant rods to correct severe scoliosis that would otherwise have damaged her new organs. I was a bit apprehensive and overwhelmed at the prospect of meeting her. I'm not sure what I expected, but this diminutive, soft-voiced, witty, gutsy teenager captured my heart immediately. Nothing that had happened to her has in any way diminished her spirit.

Jessica was determined to publish a book about her experiences. She and her doctors at St. Louis Children's Hospital were convinced that such a book would serve two important purposes: it would help others experiencing the same kinds of problems to understand and find hope, and it would also make readers aware of the very personal side of organ donation, and perhaps inspire them to sign donor cards.

This is where I came in. As an experienced teacher of writing, I've worked with hundreds of writing students over the years. My sister, who got to know Jessica when she did a series of newspaper features about her illness and need of a transplant, asked me to

meet this determined teenager and see if I could help her get a book out.

Jessica showed me the stacks of diaries she had been keeping almost since she learned to write. She'd been ill all of her life, undergoing her first open-heart surgery when she was only ten days old. Elizabeth, Jessica's mother, kept a diary about her until she learned to write, and then encouraged her to continue. The disease, the surgery and the medicines necessary to keep Jessica alive took their toll, and she was a frail child, so writing became her activity. She entertained herself when other youngsters were playing by writing down her thoughts and experiences. Writing helped her pass the time, and it kept her outlook positive.

When I read the diaries, I knew immediately I was onto something special. All the spirit, wit, courage, determination, honesty, mischief, and wisdom beyond her years were captured in the pages of the many notebooks she'd filled. Yet they needed work to turn them into a readable, marketable book.

I started working as Jessica's writing coach. We met whenever our schedules permitted. I used strategies learned through my years with the writing project to help Jessica bring out the best in her writing. During each session we'd focus on a particular writing strategy, try a couple of exercises implementing the strategy, and then apply the strategy to a passage in her diaries.

One of the first concepts we tackled was "show-not-tell" writing. I gave Jessica the following sentence: "The man sitting on the park bench was old." We agreed that this sentence was pretty bland. I then asked her to write a paragraph about him in which every sentence added to the feeling that he was old, but never used that word again. She wrote:

> *His gray hair showed beneath the battered felt hat he wore. His wrinkled face showed the passage of time like a road map. He pressed his cane hard against the ground to still his trembling hands. After an hour of gazing into the distance, he struggled up and slowly walked toward his silent, lonely apartment.*

Then we looked at her journals and selected a passage we both thought could use more life:

> *Mamaw Ann is another special person in my life. She always cooks something good when I go there, and she's always trying to get me to eat more. I love her a lot.*

After applying the concept of "showing writing," Jessica came back with:

> *To describe Mamaw Ann is to know her. She's reliable, and is with me even when I'm coming out of anesthesia and yelling at everybody. She's clean just like her house. I mean, when she vacuums she does it for at least two hours. (Now I know where my mother gets that from. I just hope it's not genetic.) She's predictable. She has worn the same hair style for twenty years. And she always tells me to be good. She says she's going to leave Papaw Lanny to me in her will because he and I get along so well.*

Her writing improved each time we worked together. One day I introduced the "cookie person" writing prompt: describe someone who is so loving, so supportive, that they would give you a cookie right before dinner, even if they knew you didn't need it. Deciding upon her cookie person, Jessica wrote, "My Papaw Lanny is special because he is always there for me." She then added showing details, and her writing came alive:

> *Throughout my life I've been sick a lot, and the person I remember standing by me most, other than my mom, is Papaw Lanny. He can always make me laugh no matter how bad I feel. When I'm down and depressed I remember what he's always told me. 'First you can always find someone a lot worse of than you, and second, God has everything under control.'*
>
> *When I was little I couldn't go out to play because I would get too hot and faint. We would sit by Mamaw Ann's fish tank and read books or play games, and he would make faces like the fish.*

We followed these sessions up with others on writing to an audience, using vivid verbs, writing fluently, and other writing skills. Finally I taught her to make a cluster to plan for her entire book. We placed her name in the middle, and then attached every aspect of her life that she wanted to write about, adding details until it looked like a crazy-quilted web. "You know, Jessica," I told her, "if you wrote about

everything on your cluster the way you wrote about Papaw Lanny, we'd have a book."

Jessica was a quick study, and it's a good thing. My time to work with her was limited, for soon after the clustering session, I missed seeing her for months. Her body started rejecting her new lungs, and she also contracted mucore fungus, which required surgery to remove the affected part of one lung. She was in St. Louis Children's Hospital for months. Sensing that the doctors thought there was little hope, she told them, "If I'm going to die, it's going to be at home among familiar things and people I love. Pack my bags."

As she had done many times before, Jessica proved the doctors and medical science wrong. Against all odds, she got better. Very slowly, but better. When she was able to have me come over again, she showed me stacks of notebooks she'd filled. She had been revising, according to my suggestions, the material for her book during the whole ordeal!

She now had the all the material she needed for her book, so the responsibility shifted to me to turn her notebooks into a cohesive manuscript. I was overwhelmed at first—so much good material, so many choices, so much work. I couldn't allow myself too much ruminating time, though, for I felt a sense of urgency that few projects could ever impose: I was afraid Jessica might not live to see the book.

My first step was a cluster that included all the major topics I'd read in her notebooks. With it I arranged the material in a logical manner, cutting and pasting both literally and on the computer. That done, I went into a typing, writing frenzy. I had to make her words flow and give her sentences continuity without deviating from her intent or losing her voice. After work each night, I would type until one or two in the morning. Jessica's writing was so powerful, I often cried onto the keyboard or threw my head back and laughed aloud at her words. Though I worked hard, it was a wonderful time for me.

When the rough draft was done, I sent her a copy with a sigh of relief; she would at least have seen the first draft of her book. She read it, called me to express her pleasure, and shared it with her strong, supportive family. Then we started a series of many revising and editing sessions. Sometimes we traveled the 120 miles between our homes to meet, exchange copies, talk, and plan. Other times we faxed or mailed copies and waited.

A Will to Live:

THE DIARY OF A TRANSPLANT KID

by

Jessica Pace

with

Jane Talbert

As we neared the end of that process, I began thinking about publishers. Although we had the promise of a national publisher, going through that process would have taken more time than we feared we had. So I talked to my sister, Phyllis Harper, who had first introduced me to Jessica. Phyllis had always dreamed of setting up her own publishing company, and now, recently retired from journalism, she had some time to pursue her ambition. "You could publish Jessica's book to launch Fawn Grove Publications," I told her. I didn't have to twist her arm, for she had worked with us throughout and was as anxious as I for Jessica to see her book.

So Phyllis stepped in and quickly found a printer in a nearby rural town who did quality work and was flexible enough to accommodate our need for a large-scale but quick print job. Phyllis's daughter set the type, designed the cover and got everything camera-ready. The galley sheets, complete with pictures, went to Jessica. Another milestone! Her mother sent the

galleys to a nurse at St. Louis Children's Hospital who had become a close friend, to have her proofread them for medical terminology. The nurse then showed the galleys to others at the hospital, and when the public relations department saw them, they enthusiastically came on board by sponsoring a national tour to promote the book and encourage organ donation.

The book came out in February, 1998, about a month after Jessica's sixteenth birthday. All the hard work, time, travel, and frustration were repaid when Jessica held her book with her name on the cover in her hand. She was jubilant. Her health had improved as we progressed with the book and she had just received her best six-month checkup ever.

The night before our first autographing party, I answered my phone to hear a sweet, slightly husky little voice ask, "Miss Jane," (yes, in the true Southern style, she has given me that respectful title), "what color dress are you wearing to our book signing tomorrow?" I hadn't had time to think that far ahead—whatever was clean was my first thought! I told her I'd wear something navy. "Okay, I wanted to wear the right color so we wouldn't clash." I was again reminded that despite her daily struggle for life, Jessica was still, in many ways, a normal teenage girl.

Soon after the book came out, we were asked to attend an autograph session at the gift shop in Children's Hospital. What an amazing event! The chairman of the board came by and bought fifty copies for his personal giving. (We almost wore our hands out signing all of those in a hurry.) Nurses, doctors, parents whose children faced transplant surgery—one that very afternoon—all came to buy books. Four television stations interviewed us, as well as several newspapers.

Jessica's story sold quickly and has already gone into a second printing. We have had book signings in four cities, with others to follow as Jessica and I have time. We have been interviewed on television stations in Tupelo, Jackson, Memphis, and four stations in St. Louis. Newspapers from all those cities have carried full-page articles about Jessica. In August she was featured in a regional infomercial in *People Magazine*. The producers of *Oprah* and the *Today Show* have invited us for interviews, but no dates have been set.

Jessica's family has shared in all this excitement, traveling with Jessica and me on our book tour. I fully expect to become Mama Jane at any minute, I am so much a part of their circle. They are a special, close-knit family, and people who know them credit their love and support for instilling in Jessica the will to live that has brought her through all her medical emergencies. "We never left her alone in the intensive care nursery, although we could only reach in and touch her with one hand," Mamaw Ann recalls of the early battles for her life.

Jessica realizes how much they have given her. "Maybe you'll think I'm a baby," she says in her 'Dr. Mom' chapter,

> *but when I'm sick I want my mother. She'll rub my face and arms and sing to me, and even when I'm unconscious I can tell she's there. Papaw Lanny would move heaven and earth if I asked him to, and Mamaw Ann is reliable. She'll stay with me even when I'm coming out of anesthesia and yelling at everybody. My sister Reagan kept me from giving up, because I love her and can't think of her going through life without knowing her big sister. And my younger brother Jordan is the only one who has treated me like I was normal through this whole thing. He got on my nerves and aggravated me; even when I was sick he would fight with me. Still does, but nowadays I can beat him up!*

Jessica's spirit continues to amaze me. Not many teenagers have had a double lung and heart transplant. None have had the combination of subsequent surgeries she underwent. No other person has had mucore fungus and lived. And how many sixteen-year-olds have a book out, already in its second printing, and making an indelible impact on the lives of those who read it? Jessica faced all these challenges with unparalleled courage and determination.

A Will to Live: the Diary of a Transplant Kid has been the subject of at least one book report; to me as an English teacher, somehow that makes it official! We are hearing from sick children and adults who have been inspired by Jessica's words; some say she expressed things they wanted to say but didn't know how to. Another goal was realized when a lady told us, "After we read the book, my husband told me that if anything happened to him, he'd want to be an organ donor. Until then, I had no idea he felt that way." As Jessica's pediatrician quipped, "Anyone who doesn't reach for a donor card after reading Jessica's book doesn't have a heart anyway!"

All of the professionals who worked on this book donated their time and expertise; even the printer, who admitted he was moved to tears when he read the book, only charged for the actual cost of printing. Profits go to a trust fund for Jessica, with a percentage to a charity she has chosen.

My own compensation came in a note I received from Jessica, the most profound reward that I could hope for. It said, "You have made my dream become a reality. The card catalog says so. Look up the book, and under *author* it has my name."

****

Update: Jessica underwent another lung transplant in August. Her Uncle Bubby and Aunt Lori each donated a lobe of a lung, so she had a good match. She came through the surgery well and is slowly progressing.

Copies of *A Will To Live* can be ordered by sending a check or money order payable to Fawn Grove Publications for $16.95 plus $3.00 for postage and handling to: Fawn Grove Publications, P.O. Box 3657, Tupelo, MS 38802-3657.

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Lord, Teach This Patient Patience, But Hurry! An Excerpt from *A Will to Live*

by Jessica Pace

Patience is a virtue. Whoever said that obviously never had to wait for a transplant. Looking back, one of the hard things is getting your strength back, but the very hardest thing is the wait. You jump every time the phone rings, especially if it rings late at night. The wait is especially hard around the holidays. It's kinda sad that you're waiting for someone to die in order for you to live. But the way I think about it is we're all going to die. We don't know when or how. But when God calls us to heaven we're going whether we want to or not.

When I first heard about a transplant that could give me a second chance at life, I can't begin to tell you what went through my mind. Crazy stuff. Will I act or begin to look like my donor? All the medicines. Being separated from my family. The possible risks or setbacks that could happen and the idea of a dead person's parts being in me and guilt that somebody had to die so I could live. But when I got so sick that going from one room to the other got me out of breath, I started watching the news, hoping and praying that someone would die and leave their organs. I know it's selfish but I thought of it a lot.

I was afraid to go to sleep at night, afraid I wouldn't wake up. I felt guilty for putting my family through this. So one day I decided to make out my will. I wanted every member of my family to have something of mine to remember me by. Then when I was getting worse, I started thinking about my funeral. I didn't tell Mom at the time because I didn't want to upset her or anyone else.

It's not a fun way to live, not knowing whether you're going to make it to see tomorrow. I would be afraid to go to sleep, afraid I wouldn't wake up and when I would finally go to sleep it would be just as the sun was rising. I didn't want to die at night. If I was going to die I wanted to die meeting the sun. So I told the Lord if I was going to die I wanted to die in the morning.

I've heard that fishermen have a lot of patience. My dad, James, enjoys fishing, and I remember Dad, Mom, Jordan and me going fishing together, always early in the morning. Of course my dad was the only one who had the patience to really fish. Those trips to me learn patience Plus, the fishing pond, I believe, helped we had fun except when Jordan decided to play with the worms.

Patience is learned early in life, especially for someone like me. I try to think of some of the good ways I've learned this characteristic, and not just the bad.

Strange Students in a Strange Land:

An Excerpt from *A Poem for Every Student*

by

SHERYL LAIN

◆

In winter of 1996, Sheryl Lain, director of the Wyoming Writing Project, submitted to The Quarterly *her article, "A Poem for Every Student." Reading her piece, we knew we were in the presence of a rare talent, both as a writer and as a teacher. We asked Sheryl to expand her article into a book, one which illustrates the special way she connects with her students by writing each of them a poem.* A Poem for Every Student: Creating Community in a Public School Classroom, *is being published by the National Writing Project this November. Sheryl's book is much more than a book of poems; it is a clear-eyed, articulate portrait of the complexity of school life and a moral and practical guide for teachers building more humane classrooms.*

—The Editors

Junior highs house lunatics, and I don't mean just the students.

I'd taught four years in high school before we moved from central Wyoming to Cheyenne. In our new home town, I landed a junior high teaching job, and thus began a stint of some fifteen years with the crowd who taught me about rocking along, afloat on a sea of hormones.

The first faculty meeting should have warned me. The teachers at the table across from mine giggled maniacally while the principal talked. Their junior high behavior hinted at things to come, a craziness that was confirmed at the first faculty party.

When I came home from the October ice breaker, my husband Gayle asked, "How'd it go?"

"You gotta get me out of this place."

"Why? What happened?"

"Those people threw food at each other. A slice of bologna landed on my head. We were kicked out of the Coors Hospitality Room after the fist fight."

"A fist fight? You gotta be kidding."

"Nope. Ever heard of the horn trick?"

"Oh, yeah. The one where some fool blows flour all over himself?"

"Yeah. The PE guy did it to the music guy. The music guy has good lungs, being a singer and all, and he blew hard on some crazy-looking horn. Didn't realize that the end of the horn was loaded with flour aimed right at his face. He didn't think the prank was funny. He hit the PE guy before those nuts could quit laughing long enough to grab his arms."

Gayle grinned in spite of himself.

"So much stuff was going on I got a headache."

In spite of my culture shock, I didn't resign from that junior high, and by the Christmas faculty party, bologna throwing didn't seem out of the ordinary any more.

Something happens to all the inmates in junior high. The students lead the way, and the teachers follow.

The teachers who cut up, resembling their own students, are in some way validating the kids' stages. I've known teachers who perform pratfalls, just to show students they can live through embarrassment. "See, kids," the teacher behavior seems to say, "you fall down, you laugh, you live to tell about it."

During my long stay in junior high, I knew some loonie birds, and some kids filled to the brim with rage, pain, fear. Students this age are like fresh garden tomatoes: they have very thin skins. From them, I learned to dislodge some of my own stuffy perceptions about propriety so I could be a better teacher. I'm convinced that once I learned to deal with weird people, I really learned to teach.

Robbie the Red Baron

Take seventh-grade Robbie. He was a very strange boy. During finals, he entertained himself, at the same time he was doing a first-rate job of revising a piece for his writing folder, by flying his desk. First, he'd tip the wings to the left. Then he'd tip the wings to the right. He accompanied the maneuvers with sound effects, not too loud, but loud enough for me to hear. When I gave him the teacher-laser look, he winked at me.

Another time, all of us, teacher and students, were right there with Pony Boy in *The Outsider*. Back in our world, a police siren sounded out on Pershing Street. Some of us were so engrossed in escaping the burning building we didn't even register the noise, but Robbie hit the floor shouting, "Take shelter! Take shelter!" He never really quit acting.

Robbie fit into the loonie category. I gave him this poem.

Robbie
So much depends upon
the bright green gum bubble
Robbie blows.
It pops on his nose
a light bright note in this gray day.

My poem to Rob tried to tell him that, for all his kooky behaviors, I liked him. In my words, he could sense that it was OK to be zany. Even grownups need to keep alive some adolescent whackiness—belly laughing, racing their own kids, and retaining a mischievous twinkle in their eyes. Adulthood without a little adolescent goofiness is like 7-Up without carbonation. I wanted Rob to know that I knew he'd grow up. When he did, I had complete confidence he'd remember to zip up his mouth in business meetings.

School Subtracts Steve

While the junior high milieu may be the source of oddball humor, it is also an environment that generates a lot of pain. Steve's ninth grade year was terrible. Small for his age, Steve prayed to the puberty god for growth. "Please," he'd beg, "let me grow out of size-ten T-shirts." His prayers weren't immediately answered. PE was agony, showering with the other boys, fearing the ridicule he came to expect.

Steve's clenched jaw revealed his barely controlled rage. At school, he held himself rigidly in check. At home, his mom eventually told me, he let it all out, venting. He screamed himself hoarse, even shoved her once, hard. She'd had it, put him in the psych ward of the local hospital for three weeks. After all, she was tired, raising Steve alone with no father to offer support and occasional relief.

At first I didn't know why he disappeared from school. I asked around the lounge. Fran, a science teacher, was there; she didn't know him. Neither did some guy at the coffee machine, whose name I didn't know. No one did. Our school housed about 1,200 students, not large by some standards, but I caught myself feeling that old frustration: this school does more to keep people separated than it does to help us connect. What Native American tribe was it, I mused, that maintained itself at about fifty people? If they exceeded fifty, they couldn't keep track of everyone so the tribe would split.

After the third day, a homebound teacher came to my door, asking for Steve's homework; that's when I learned where he was.

Steve came back to class subdued. He never wrote or talked about the time-out. We both knew where he'd been, but he shut his mouth about the whole experience. I felt sorry for him. He reminded me of my own son, now away in college. Jade used to be a little like Steve. But my boy's rage turned inward, forming a murky pool of depression. At home I talked about Steve, expressing my concern for him. The talk, the fact that a teacher cared, comforted my grown boy, who still remembered the nightmare of adolescence.

I wrote about Steve in my teacher journal.

Steve
does not know
he sits at my dinner table.
I think of him daily and my other blood son
away at college
I know their inner staggerings against walls
and the bruises.
My own son in his long purgatory
cried,
"Is it worth it?
Where's the pattern that makes sense?"
Somehow,
knowing I carry this student around in my heart
comforts my own son.

I hoped that Steve could sense my compassion. I think he did. Three years later I worked with him and 150 other student writers in a writing clinic out at the college. He came up to me and, reserved as he was, touched my arm, a Steve embrace, distant but warm.

Steve wrote about his feelings toward school in a poignant poem about learning the hard way how school subtracts a person.

Arithmetic of School
Take the total of a person
Subtract 20% for a parent's degrading remarks.
You are 80%
Subtract another 20% for kids who hinder and pester.
You are 60%
Subtract another 20% for teachers
who do not see, do not help.
You are now 40%.
Lose another 20% a day for relatives
who do not openly love and cherish.
You are 20%.
Drop another 20% due to shyness and low self-esteem.
You are 0.

Though Steve never openly talked about his "mental" problems, Arithmetic communicated his suffering and loneliness. Eventually, he felt strong enough to publish his poem in the school literary magazine.

About School

Who ever thought it would be a good idea to pack goofballs like Robbie and sufferers like Steve together? The whole time I worked with this age group, I found myself wishing for something better. A better way to get the job done. Students like Robbie need stages and spotlights and a real audience to play to. For every play in the curriculum, they need to perform in one, complete with spotlights, make-up. They need to connect with someone else in biographies and history books, someone whom they admired, someone who made them cry. For every novel they read raising issues of social class or prejudice, they need to build a bus shelter or deliver a meal on wheels. For every poem to read, they need to write ten and produce literary magazines. They needed newspapers to publish, debates to hold on earth-shaking issues, lots of writing about their lives, their loved ones, their beloved places. And in the process of learning and doing, the sad ones like Steve might feel more at home.

These pseudo-adults needed to stretch their wings, however silly and awkward they look — to take risks and laugh at their own mistakes. Junior highs should be safe places to practice flying and flopping. Hard to do in the current setting.

I taught fifteen years in a traditional junior high, straight out of the '50s. Fonzie would have felt at home there. Seventh, eighth, and ninth graders careened through the doors at 7:30 a.m., three hours before they were fully awake. They were released at 2:30, three hours before parents came home from work to keep them out of trouble. Lunch lasted twenty minutes — long enough for all of us to wolf down our food, but not long enough for anyone to start a full-fledged food or fist fight.

The bells rang every 44 minutes all day and the lockers were off limits, period, the better to prevent locker horseplay, such as locking small Steve inside. Kids took English, social studies, science, math, P.E., shop, home ec, foreign language, art, music — all segregated from one another, all content-driven.

If you were smart or had aggressive parents, you might land in honors something or other. If you were "dumb" or parentless or misunderstood, you might find yourself in remedial something. And that's the pack you ran with all day.

Parents of junior highers didn't come to school much, maybe because they couldn't negotiate a relationship

with anyone on campus, full to overflowing with half-crazed inmates. In many junior highs, PTOs and PTAs cease to exist, and fewer parents come to open house. Maybe, discomfited, they remember their owns pains and idiocies those umpteen years ago when they were in the same junior high boat.

Traditional junior highs do not work anymore, if they ever did, and moving ninth graders to high schools in order to make room for sixth graders to join the rat race isn't the answer. Instead, I pined for some elementary school practices: self-contained classrooms, longer blocks of uninterrupted time, more hands-on learning, more integrated subjects, fewer students for a few teachers to teach all day long, everyone getting to know and feel responsible for one another.

Those big schools were built under the faulty assumption that bigger is cheaper. One principal, one utility bill, one cafeteria crew. But the debits outweigh the credits. The more kids in one place, the more disciplinarians. More principals, cops, counselors, special services personnel are hired to manage the crowds. Volunteers, like foster grandparents, found in every elementary school, are scarce as hounds' teeth in junior high. They're probably intimidated by the numbers packed in school like tuna in Star-Kist cans.

Once, a group of teachers from Japan came to Cheyenne and wanted to tour a typical American junior high. My principal, bless him, came to my room — it was my prep period — and asked me to show them around. I dreaded the job. It was Friday afternoon, last period. It was spring, so juices were flowing inside and out. To top it all off, it was Crazy Day, meaning students could dress up in some wild costume depicting '50s attire. In short, the kids were wound up.

I met my guests at the front door, all of us smiling and bowing at one another. Off we went down the long math hall. I figured that'd be a safe place to find some real work going on. Wrong! In the first room, two boys were standing in the front of the room, squared off, wearing boxing gloves. The teacher looked up at us with glazed eyes.

Oops! Bad day here. I led my gaggle off to the next room. Kids were sitting atop desks, on the radiator, talking away the last ten minutes of the week. In another room kids were watching a movie, in another they were arguing about the best make of cars.

The bell was about to ring letting school out. I needed to find a safe place for my entourage out of harm's way when the floodgates of hell were raised, so I herded them into a little alcove out of the hallway. Some kids dashed out of rooms a few minutes early, clanging the doors against the walls. When the bell rang, the kids hit the halls in earnest, running off their adrenaline-powered joy. Seeing our school from the visitors' eyes, I began to wonder in earnest about how, and why, we do things the way we do.

Doug Caught in Time Warp

Doug, like Steve, was another small boy, but he coped by ignoring all of us completely. When he came to, which he rarely did, he acted surprised to find himself in junior high school. He wasn't done playing and imagining fantastic journeys far away from the realities of school. I watched Doug work his way down the hallway to the lunchroom. There he was, a boy who hadn't yet shaved, applied deodorant, or tamed down his cowlick. He shuffled along behind a gaggle of ninth grade girls — Laura and her crew — probably giggling about sexual adventures last Friday night. I saw an arm snake out of the mash of bodies and hit him in the back of the head, lurching him forward into the girls.

From my vantage point against the hall, I saw all their vulnerabilities — the girls worrying about red stains on the backs of their white pants, the boys feeling too puny to peel off their shirts in PE, the seventh graders worrying about their locker combinations, everyone sniffing the air, using that special adolescent radar to detect the rise and fall of their social standing.

Doug's defense against the hullabaloo was to check out, mentally. He just wasn't there. He spent so much time fantasizing I was surprised he could find his way home to supper. His writing was never first-person narrative, never about his own real-life experiences. Instead, he wrote wild tales about superheroes, crosses between flora and fauna, with some human traits thrown in. He never paid attention and he never combed his hair. That's how disconnected he was from the classroom and his social condition. Doug created a hiatus, a place in his head to be for a while until something shook him awake — puberty or future responsibilities.

I gave Doug his poem gift.

Doug's
off on vacation at his desk sometimes.
He wants to write his own way
no limits
and his story of the gruesome, man-eating tree
proves he should.
He learned to be in la-la land at school.
Elementary school
forced him to color in the lines of very narrow hallways.
Junior high
combed his hair flat, taming boyhood cowlicks.
Somehow, in this Halloween House of Horrors,
he manages to have fun.
That alone makes you a Huck Finn grinning hero.

Donie Fears School

At the beginning of seventh grade, Donie was absent almost every day. The change from her neighborhood elementary to the big junior high did her in. She was scared of forgetting her locker combination. She was scared of the giant ninth graders lording over the hallways. She was scared of forgetting what homework was assigned in what class. Fear made her sick.

One day, with Donie present, I told the class about an experiment I remembered from some psychology text, about how these experimenters wanted to test the stress levels of parents who came to junior high open house. They hooked their parent-subjects up to skin-sensitive equipment and had them do some visual imagery about their own junior high days. The needles on those instruments just had a jumping fit. Fears, real or imagined, loom around the corners in secondary schools, and grownups still remember.

Eventually Donie started coming to school and staying. She wrote fiendishly in her journal, all about growing up out in the country. Her insight was remarkably perceptive for a thirteen-year-old. She told about how her mother fashioned a switch and faked like she would use it just to get Donie on the school bus in first grade. Donie was afraid of the bus driver who had a funny nose. She told about how she got sick every single time they went on a trip to see her grandma — even her stomach was sensitive to change.

I, too, grew up in the country and, like Donie, was the designated garbage burner. One time after school, we talked about our common experiences. We'd been working on the school newspaper, and Donie was waiting for a ride. "Were you ever afraid to take out the garbage at night?" She nodded her head. "Night sure comes early in the winter." I showed her a little poem I'd written about my terrors.

Going out toward the deep darkness
with the trash
I'm confidence, the light house at my back, whistling
to still the small fear.
I dump and turn
my back vulnerable against the listening night.
I pick up speed racing no breath for whistling,
to the pool of back porch light and screened safety
in the nick of time
slam the door on the fingers of fear.
Taking a deep breath,
I whistle into the house
hiding my wheezing weakness.

Thus began our poem conversations. Back and forth. I wrote one; Donie wrote one.

Did you ever wonder that stars
maybe feel our eyes pull up?
Did you ever wonder that moons
know they pull our blood like tides?
Did you ever wonder that green grass knows
it pulls us flat to the earth?
Sometimes I think
stars, moons, grass
know more than me.

I wrote to her during our poem exchange before Christmas break. The unsaid message in this poem is how much I admire Donie's ability to bounce back and right herself.

Donie
a gentle girl, rare in junior high schools
so busy manufacturing cookie-cutter kids.
It made you sick at first.
Your mom wrote excuses for you.
Days at a time you stayed home in bed
during your seventh grade year of adjustment.
The miracle?
You came back and landed a spot on the honor roll.
You survived school
without hardening your heart.

Today, Donie is a wonderful and wise kindergarten teacher, gently ushering the little ones into the world of school.

Shane, the Grade Grunger

"What was the poem you read, about the wheelbarrow?" Shane was busy at the computer, word processing.

"What poem? Are you sure I read it?"

"Yeah, it had to be you. You're the only one who reads poems to me."

Shane killed himself for a 4.0 grade average. His mother called me a few weeks after school started to be sure I knew the kind of stress Shane put on himself. I told her I knew he coveted A's, but, according to the Stanford Diagnostic Reading Test, Shane's reading ability was average; according to the district writing test, his writing was average. No matter, this kid would not settle for average grades.

I wrote this poem for Shane. Then I decided not to give it to him. No sense in giving him more of my opinion than he could tolerate.

Shane, your mom
called alerting
me to your quest for straight A's.
I said I know
but hinted, so as not to make her mad, that
self respect and deep learning
shouldn't be sacrificed to the GPA god.
Said: What a tricky balance helping a boy know
quantity isn't quality.
We all use fake mile markers
on the muddy road of life,
like:
What car do you drive? Are those Guess jeans?
It's almost un-American of me to think
that coveting after A's is
a dead end in this school puzzle.
You know those Pizza Hut mazes kids draw on with
a pencil line?
Sometimes you bump smack into a dead end.
Grades alone won't take you everywhere you want to be.

Because he loved right answers so much, Shane was poetry-phobic, worrying that I might give him a B for a reason he couldn't even fathom. He was much more comfortable with true/false tests, one clear right answer to memorize. But he relaxed once he realized he wouldn't be tested nor asked to analyze. "Just listen." That's all I asked of him. Poetry offered Shane the idea that he could play with language. He quit tying himself into knots, trying to be perfect the first time around. I got a kick out of watching him squint his eyes and move his words around here and there, like furniture, just to see the effect.

Something about reading poetry enriches the air in the classroom. The words in the poems, the shape of them, crop up in student writing.

One day at the computer he was composing an imitation of William Carlos Williams' "Red Wheelbarrow."

Wheelbarrow:
So much depends
upon
a red wheel
barrow
glazed with rain
water
beside the white
chickens

Shane's version was fresh as peppermint:

So much depends
upon the white lifesaver
glazed with sugar coating.
I taste winter.

Shane fell in love that ninth-grade year, with Melissa, a pretty, peppy cheerleader, and he was just as intense about her as he was about grades. He wrote this poem, published it in the classroom anthology:

Long long ago
three months
my life shot up like a rocket
for
when I asked
you said yes.

Melissa loved Shane — for a month or so. Then, in typical ninth-grade style, she broke up with him two days after he wrote his poem.

Shane was devastated, for a few hours. But he was spunky and he'd learned, partly through poetry writing, to go a little easier on himself. The writing helped him figure out what he was thinking — and how he thought. Maybe more than any other kind of writing, the poetry allowed him to be free enough to feel the power of words, a liberation that perked up his other writing. He was learning to balance straight-line thinking with playfulness and imagination.

Writing was such an important learning tool for my junior high students. It helped them keep their footing. They needed to write every day just to keep up with themselves, to move all their learning into consciousness. Junior high minds, like Shane's, are in a waking-up stage. They still remember the times tables and the names of states and capitals memorized in elementary school, but their minds are at a different place. The "Ah-ha!" learning happens more and more often. When those book and school concepts connect with the students' inarticulated knowing, their faces look like they just awoke from hibernation.

Shane kept getting A's in my class, but his jaw relaxed and he quit hanging out at my desk arguing over every lost half point.

Mighty Morphin Travelers

Teaching in junior high taught me about emotional roller coaster rides. Even though kids looked like they were morphing at the speed of light, catapulting around blind corners, their core selves were somewhere inside, intact. Once I talked with Brian, my student teacher, about how sometimes I had this feeling. Maybe if I looked closely at Shane, or Donie or Doug, squinting my eyes in concentration, I could project them safely into some future place with all their unique inner flavors intact.

After we talked, I wrote a poem and shared it with Brian.

Beam Me Up, Teach,
I love them,
these blatant busybodies,
awkward child-men of our species.
Their split hooves tap a constant rhythm
down the corridors of youth.
Riding the rapids, they abandon safety for experience.
What scars? They shrug.
They charge every red sea,
expecting water walls to part.
I'm an inanimate object to them,
a life preserver,
ready to buoy their heads above the water
before they submerge on the third count.

Originally, Brian had wanted to teach high school, but he's teaching junior high instead, out in California. I picture him on his roller coaster ride, holding on for dear life. Maybe even throwing food at a faculty party.

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A Poem for Every Student *can be ordered from the National Writing Project by calling (510) 642-0963.*

Mi Voz Suena Asi (My Voice Sounds Like This):

Generative Themes in Second Grade

by

CATHY CARMICHAEL

◆

Fourth Grade
Papers passed back
to desks in rows.
Red circles and lines
on stories.
The teacher walks
to her big desk.
I've seen her book.
The one with our names.
Mine's fourth from the top.
The one where she writes
neat little A B C
with pencil.
She hits her bell.
We all look up.
Time to go home.
Red Pen.
Big Desk.
Book.
Bell
Playing school
must be fun
for her.

Fourth grade was the year I figured out what being a "good student" meant. You watch the teacher for a little while, observe what she likes to hear, and figure out how and when she likes you to answer. But I also discovered that the main thing teachers like to hear is quiet. So if you weren't absolutely sure the teacher would react positively to what you had to say, it was best to keep your hand down. Keep your idea to yourself.

Not surprisingly, I spent the following 12 years of schooling a safe, good student. I watched my teachers, respected their power and got A's and B's, even through college, without ever having to speak up, defend a position, argue an issue. It's true I took no risks, but I worked hard at what I was told to do. According to the school establishment, I was a success.

Only in my social realm did I learn the negative consequences of silence. With friends I realized that my habit of keeping quiet rather than defending myself and my beliefs could be problematic and sometimes dangerous. Among my peers, not saying "no" often meant I was saying "yes." By not taking a stand, I was by default taking a stand. I've often wondered why I had to learn such hard lessons on the playground and in the streets. What if my teachers had been open to my voice in the classroom, had even *expected* me to use it? How would I be a different person today?

Five years ago I became a teacher and entered my first classroom understanding that teaching is more than sitting at a "Big Desk" and wielding power. I realized that encouraging student voices would be one of my greater responsibilities. But I wasn't prepared for the challenge I faced: second graders already wanting the "right" answer, passively accepting what they were told, afraid to ask why. It was as though, at age seven, they already knew that their voices had no place at school.

Voice

What is voice, and why should it necessarily have a place in schools? Educator Henry Giroux describes the concept of voice as:

> *...the principles of dialogue as they are enunciated and enacted within particular social settings. The concept of voice represents the unique instances of self-expression through which students affirm their own class, culture, racial and gender identities. The category of voice then refers to the means at our disposal — the discourses available to us — to make ourselves understood and listened to, and to define ourselves as active participants in the world.* (Giroux, from Darder, 1991, p. 66)

In other words, voice represents not only the way we express ourselves so that others understand, but also the way we define our very identities. Voice seems to be formed within the context of our life experience. Giroux points out, however, that these experiences are also influenced by historical and social interests; they often "harbor the sedimentation of domination" (Giroux, 1988, p. 117).

This last element profoundly affects the role of teachers in the development of voice in the classroom. For it would seem now not enough simply to sit back and let students "express themselves." Certainly, this exercise is important, but now that we understand voice within the context of history and oppression, a critical look, or as Paulo Freire notes, a "working on" of these experiences, becomes very important. It isn't enough, for example, to discuss, celebrate and display the rich culture of my Mexican-American students by bringing in artifacts and having them share experiences from their community. Instead, Freire and Giroux challenge us to explore critically how conquest, slavery and racism have helped form these experiences and student voices.

And what a challenge it is! The implications for us as teachers are great. Antonia Darder points out that for bicultural students, voice develops not only through dialogue with other students, but also with the presence of a bicultural educator "who facilitates the critical (and often fearful) journey into the previously prohibited terrain of the bicultural discourse" (Darder, 1991, p. 69). White educators in the bicultural classroom assisting in the development of voice "must first come to acknowledge their own limitations, prejudices, and biases, and must be willing to enter into dialogue with their students in a spirit of humility and with respect for the knowledge that students bring to the classroom" (Darder, 1991, p. 70). As a white teacher myself, I suspected that this personal, transformative process wasn't as easy as it sounded, and began to wonder in what ways I would be able to work on voice with my students.

Writing is particularly difficult for children because their language must be directed on paper to an abstract audience that doesn't even seem to exist. I observed this struggle as I watched my seven-year-old students; I heard their rich language during play time that never seemed to transfer to writing. Even following explicit encouragement and whole-class brainstorming for prior knowledge, my students typically wrote pieces like:

> *Me gustan mucho las flores porque están bonitas. Me gustan los conejitos porque están bonitos. (I like flowers a lot because they are pretty. I like bunnies because they are pretty.)*

Certainly a piece like this shows few organizational and mechanical errors, and the child is describing the things she likes. Yet the written work lacks the unique voice of the student I hear at play time. I was bothered by such "safe" writing and wondered how to facilitate the expression of student voice, not only orally, but in written form as well.

Success

Fortunately, my reading of Paolo Freire (1970) suggested a method of helping my students develop their voices. In the early 1960s, Freire and his colleagues experienced widespread success, not only in teaching the marginalized how to read and write, but also in facilitating the expression of their voices and awakening social consciousness.

Freire began in students' homes and communities, listening to the themes pertinent to their lives. Later, he brought these "generative themes" to "culture circles," comprised of students and a facilitator-learner, where the themes were presented in picture form and discussed by the group. Learners were challenged to look at their lives both personally and critically, and they came to understand that they could influence their own reality.

The presentation of a generative theme in culture circles was done through a *code*, or "a concrete physical representation of a particularly critical issue that has come up during the listening phase" (Wallerstein, 1987, p. 38). Codes included pictures, photos, skits or collages that reflected the learner's reality. After the code was presented, learners participated in a problem-posing discussion, with the facilitator-learner posing questions organized into five phases:

1. Descriptive Phase (i.e.; "What is happening here?")
2. Definition Phase (i.e.; "Is there a problem? What is the problem?")
3. Sharing Phase (i.e.; "When has this ever happened to you before?")
4. Questioning Phase (i.e.; "Why is there a problem?")
5. Strategy Phase (i.e.; "What can we do about this problem?") (Adapted from Wallerstein, 1987, pp. 38-39.)

Presentation of these codes followed by discussion of questions led not only to peer interaction, but also to heightened consciousness. Through Freire's culture circles, learners came to understand that their reality could be altered, that their destinies were in their own hands.

Others have replicated Freire's methodology in diverse adult settings, including college English classes (Elsasser and John-Steiner, 1977), discovering that social language became more explicit as written speech was brought out into the open. While the practice sounded promising, I could find no evidence of problem-posing methods used with young children, and wondered if Freire's success could be replicated in my own classroom.

I began my study, then, in this context, with these two questions:

1. Will the use of generative themes help my students develop voice in the primary grades?
2. What will happen when both teacher and students are faced with their own reality codified?

Design

I conducted my study over an 11-month period in a combination first-second grade bilingual classroom composed entirely of bicultural students. As I mentioned before, I myself am a White teacher, a point to keep in mind for the following discussion.

I replicated Freire's own process, beginning with a "listening phase" during the first semester of school. By conducting home visits for each student, making anecdotal observations of children during free time, and interviewing students with critical questions, I was able to collect a comprehensive list of themes and words reflecting my students' reality.

In the second semester, I began to present codes (usually drawings I made or copies from picture books) to the class: over a four-month period, I encouraged class discussion of eight generative themes, always following the same steps:

1. Presentation of a picture on the overhead projector;
2. Individual student quick-writing in "voice journals" (usually about 5 minutes): to record expressions of first thoughts;
3. Problem-posing discussion facilitated with questions in phases as a whole class (usually about 10 minutes);
4. Individual student writing in "voice journals" (again, about 10 minutes) to record thoughts after discussion.

A note about language use: my class included both English and Spanish language-dominant students. All students, however, were bilingual, understanding and producing considerably in their second languages. As the teacher I facilitated a typical discussion of a code using one language only. Hence, throughout the four months, four codes were presented with questions in Spanish, four with questions in English. The three codes I focus on in this article were facilitated with questions in Spanish, just as the student voices emphasized here were of students whose "first language" (language of choice and language of the home) was Spanish. So although many of my journal entries are in English, all of my actual questions were posed in Spanish.

Data Collection and Analysis

In addition to the original list of generative themes, I collected student voice journals. I also made entries in my own journal to record both the process and my own perceptions of our progress.

Three of the codes presented to the class follow, as well as my record of the class discussion surrounding the codes. In a box accompanying this article, I present one student's written responses to the three codes, as well as my analysis. I believe this collection of material illustrates that Paolo Freire's generative themes can be used in elementary schools to bridge cultural gaps among students and between student and teacher.

Tres Retratos (Three Portraits)

A Slap in the Face, Indeed

Rain pounds the pavement outside Room 11 as grumbling first and second graders slosh and shuffle in prematurely from recess. This will be their fourteenth consecutive recess indoors. By now even the final scenes from *The Lion King* on the T.V. screen fail to excite them. "These kids want out, no they NEED out," I think, biting my lip. At the same time I worry about the research project I was to have begun with my class, but have managed to put off all week. What theme could I present now that would motivate such unhappy creatures?

Observing this group of children, I am inspired by the obvious. I sketch "The Rainy Day" (Figure 1) and run to the office to make the transparency, all the while planning in my head my presentation and dialogue questions. "They will for sure relate to this kid wanting to play outside when it's raining. Given the collective mood brewing in my room, this is a shoe-in theme," I tell myself.

Within 10 minutes, students are at their desks writing and drawing about the picture introduced only by title, "El Dia Lluvioso" (The Rainy Day). I am writing also, mostly planning out my questions by phases to lead the class dialogue.

"Question #1," I begin, after getting student attention, "What is happening in this picture?"

The students answer in Spanish. "Pues que el niño está viendo que se están mojando sus cosas afuera." (Well, the boy is seeing that his things are getting wet outside.)

Figure 1

"Sí, y está preocupado porque su mamá se enoja con él y a lo mejor le pega." (Yea, and he's worried because his mom will get mad at him and maybe she'll hit him.)

"Maestra, no debes dejar tus cosas afuera." (Teacher, you shouldn't leave your things outside.)

"Sí, una vez hasta a mí me robaron la bicicleta." (Yes, once they even stole my bicycle.)

"¡Ooooo maestra, a mi primo una vez le quitaron la bicicleta y la encontró la policia!" (Oh teacher, once they stole my cousin's bike and the police found it!)

Uh-oh. Not only is this collective stream-of-consciousness dialogue straying from my sequence of phases, but as I look down at my journal, I realize my own set of predetermined questions no longer apply. These kids don't see a boy yearning to go out; they see a potentially hairy situation with mom, and worse, a person unable to care for his few possessions. And just as I begin to experience panic in my lack of preparation for this unexpected direction, I feel the group grow silent as all eyes look to me for the next question.

I realize I must abandon my plan and follow the lead of the group. I write in my journal again. This time I simply marvel at how complex and telling this, our first exposure to our own codified experience has been, especially for me. How was it possible for me to

be so off-base in predicting my students' responses to this picture? It's midyear, don't I know them yet? More importantly, though, it scares me to wonder: How many other times during the day do I presume to "name" the world for my students based on my own race and class experiences?

"Son de Otro Color"

Two months later. Now, needless to say, discussion questions are no longer planned. I'm proud of myself for being able more naturally to follow the lead of the group, and yet pose questions that are more and more critical. While on recess yard duty in the morning, I note the tremendous problem we're having with kids throwing rocks at each other. At lunch I make a transparency of a page from *La Niña Invisible* (The Invisible Girl), showing green and blue children chasing each other, throwing rocks and sticks. "Who knows what they'll make of this? They could either relate to the rock-throwing, or maybe the different colors, or maybe to nothing at all." I shrug and head to class.

This time I provide no title, no introduction. "Write about what you see," I say, and I sit down to write, too. Five minutes later, we're in the circle, ready to discuss.

"What's happening in this picture?"

"Se están peleando." (They are fighting.)

"Están tirando piedras y tienen bates y se están pegando." (They're throwing rocks and they have bats and they are hitting each other.)

(Great! They've already defined the problem.)

"Have you ever fought before?"

"Sí, una vez a mí me tiraron piedras." (Yes, once they threw rocks at me.)

After hearing a series of combat stories, I hone in on the essential question: "But why are these children fighting?"

"Pues, porque unos son azules y unos son verdes. Son diferentes." (Well, because some are blue and some are green. They're different.)

A number of discussion points come up. Who is different from you? How do boys and girls treat each other? Why is fighting bad? And what can you do when you meet a different person? These ideas are reflected in the children's subsequent journal entries (see box on p. 12 for one example).

The next day I show the picture again and ask them to remember our discussion. I suggest that they might want to write about a time when they saw someone different from themselves, and I share a story I am writing about meeting a fellow teacher in a wheelchair. Those who choose to write about meeting a person different from themselves typically stress positive, proactive solutions (tolerance, helping others). Francisco, however, had been absent the day of our discussion, and in my rush to pass out paper I quickly ask him if he has ever seen anyone who looks different from him. "Sí," he responds, and I immediately send him to go write about it.

His written response is brief yet telling, "A mí no me gusta jugar con los negritos porque son de otro color y me pegan su color."(I don't like to play with the black kids because they are a different color and their color will stick to me.)

I ask him to read it to me and he does, afterwards looking up at me with inquisitive eyes, seeming to wonder if he got the right answer. Later I realize that Francisco, having missed the dialogue the day before, is out-of-the-loop on prevailing ideas and language in our class. His seems the pure expression of voice, a personal response to the reality presented him. It seems less tainted and more honest. And while I recognize his thoughts to be limited and uninformed, I have to ask myself: Are they not also authentic?

Hands Tied

Two blocks from school, 6:00 a.m. during the middle of the strawberry-planting season. An unmarked bus makes its usual stop in front of the neighborhood market to pick up campesinos on their way to the fields for another back-breaking day of labor. But this time, those driving the bus aren't field managers, and their final destination is not the field. A community watches shocked as INS agents take the bus and those undocumented workers on it directly to a nearby holding camp and eventually to the Mexican border. Stories abound in the neighborhood and at school of families torn apart, children being left behind as parents are sent away, and even of documented residents being mistakenly deported.

The students in Room 11 have many of their own stories to share the next day: an aunt who didn't come home from the field, the cousin who was sent away. Of immediate importance to me is finding out that no classroom parents are deported and all students are still safe and cared for at home. While relieved for my students, I am angry. Angry at the injustice and lack of compassion thrust upon families in our community. I also feel scared and helpless, all the while hoping that a mistake has been made, that family members will be returned. I want to discuss at greater length the events and feelings about them with the class, but feel my own hands are tied: how can my students come to feel positive and empowered about what has happened in their neighborhood, when even I don't?

Two weeks later I show a code from the book *La Mujer Que Brillaba Más Que El Sol : The Woman Who Outshone the Sun* (see Figure 2). The picture of the main character Lucia being chased and yelled at reminds me of some recess yard scenes I have witnessed lately. Maybe, I predict, our discussion will lead students to reflect upon including others in games and treating classmates with greater respect.

After our quickwrite we sit together to discuss the picture. What is happening? They were making the girl run away, chasing her out:

"Como aquella vez maestra que vino la policia a correr a los cholos donde está mi casa." (Like that time teacher that the police came to where my house is to run out the cholos.)

"O también cuando la migra corrió a toda esa gente a México." (Or also when the migra sent all of those people to Mexico.)

My heart skips a beat. But I press on: do you think it's O.K. what the migra did?

"No. No deben de correr a la gente de aquí." (No. You shouldn't chase people from here.)

"No es bueno eso. Mi tio..." (That's not good. My uncle...)

"Pero maestra," one boy interrupts, "si ellos no son de aquí, deben de ir a México. No son de aquí." (But teacher, if they aren't from here, they should go to Mexico. They aren't from here.)

A dissenting opinion ... the first we have heard. Students are able to fuel the conversation themselves now. In the end, while no single solution has been formed, the dialogue seems to strike a personal connection with all students. Our discussion not only shows me how aware my students are of the events occurring in their surroundings, but also that they have well-developed feelings and opinions about them. I have underestimated their abilities to discuss the complex, controversial issues of their community that made me as well as my students feel uncomfortable.

Commitment to Voice: Five Implications

What have I learned from the experience of working on voice with my students? First, that teachers and students need time set aside to work on the development and expression of voice. Getting used to reflecting upon our lives critically, listening to others and writing for an audience take practice and time. Class communities, particularly of young children, need these opportunities, not just monthly as I provided them, but daily or weekly. As teachers, we need to look at how we structure our day and find ways to make voice development part of our routine.

Second, teachers must continuously reflect upon their own cultural, linguistic, class and gender experiences, and how these affect their assumptions about and interactions with students. We are kidding ourselves if we think we leave our backgrounds at home when we go to work in the morning. All professional development opportunities for teachers should provide the time and safe context for reflection on and sharing of our experiences.

Third, teachers must be encouraged to become ethnographic researchers of their own school communities. It isn't always possible for us as teachers to live in the communities of our students. Yet the more we listen to the experience of their daily lives, the more informed our practice is, particularly in the development of voice. Administrators must be responsible for providing teachers the time and support to conduct home and community visits and to share what they've learned with colleagues.

Fourth, schools must look at the ways they encourage or discourage critical perspectives and risk-taking behaviors among students, and attend to how these behaviors influence expression of voice. While we

Julio Encounters the Codes

Julio has been typically characterized an "average" student by his previous teachers. Now a second grader, his writing demonstrates use of correct spacing most of the time as well as conventional spelling, while punctuation and capitalization are less consistent. Often his written pieces are short and Julio has to be encouraged to elaborate on his ideas. Julio is extremely participatory in class, a student so eager to contribute to discussions, he frequently falls out of chairs, interrupts others and forgets to raise his hand. While he contributed a lot of ideas, he also did a lot of fidgeting, jumping and urgent calling, "Teacher! teacher! teacher!" He also has a great sense of humor and shares this with the rest of us at times I usually find inconvenient (though he's the type of student I have to laugh with anyway.) His language of preference and that of literacy instruction is Spanish.

I was intrigued with what Julio's entries would show me, particularly because it didn't seem he was always listening attentively during discussion of the pictures. His typical brevity in his writing also made me wonder if I would see more elaboration in the voice-journal entries.

1/26: The Rainy Day

Before the discussion, Julio began to write: "Yo salí a jugar pelota y llovió." (I left to go play and it rained.) He erased this though, and wrote over it: "Yo salí a jugar afuera pero no pude salir a jugar." (I went outside to play but I couldn't go out to play.) His illustration shows a house, outside of which a boy and girl stand next to a flower and an apple tree. A cloud hangs over the house and rain falls on the house.

3/19: The Invisible Girl

Before the discussion, Julio had written his name and the date, and drew a line under them. After the discussion, he wrote: Estimado amigo, te agradezco porque tu te sientes feliz porque estás jugando bonito y juegas bonito con tus amigos." (Dear friend, I appreciate that you are happy because you are playing nicely and you play nicely with your friends.) His illustration resembles the picture shown in the code with different colored people and objects resembling rocks and slingshots. During our class discussion, we had not talked about writing a letter to friends. At other times of the day though, we typically give appreciations to other students, and frequently write letters. Is Julio extending a structure we use in our class in solving the problem of this code and communicating with his abstract audience?

5/21: The Woman Who Outshone The Sun

Before the discussion, Julio wrote: "Ellos están enojados porgue quieren luchar con las señoras y con los señores que están pobres y tristes y los señores malos agarraron palos pare pelear con los pobres y tristes y quieren correr a las personas que no quieren en el pueblo. Ellos no quieren a la señora porque no la quieren en ese pueblo." (They are mad because they want to fight with the women and the men that are poor and sad and the bad men grabbed sticks to fight with the poor and sad ones and they want to run the people they don't like out of town. They don't like the woman because they don't want her in that town.)

After the discussion, he wrote: "Yo me siento triste porque corren a la gente que no quieren en el pueblo de ellos. Porque no ayudan a los otros señores y por eso los corren del pueblo."(I feel sad because they run the people they don't like out of their town. Because they don't help the other men and that's why they run them out of town.) Below, there is an illustration of a house with three figures outside. Two in red appear to be sad, one in yellow, angry.

Reflection: Julio's entries taught me that he was indeed listening to discussions. All of his entries include language and ideas brought forth by classmates (jugar, bonito, pueblo, señores). What I found particularly interesting, though, was the way Julio extended what he heard in class discussions. Even with the first code, where his writing is brief, he related personally to the character. In the second code, he almost seems to suggest a solution to fighting by composing a letter of appreciation to a friend. And in the last code, he doesn't just relay what is happening in the picture, he responds to it emotionally and is critical of it.

may say we value democratic principles, how do we really live them on a daily basis at school? We must continue to reflect upon, question and discuss the reasons for doing what we are doing.

My reason for committing myself to generative themes has been to communicate more effectively with my students, shattering the off-putting image of the powerful red pen, big desk, and stapler. I hope my students will leave my class with voices of strong conviction, developed partly thanks to our ongoing dialogue.

Figure 2

Note

[1]Darder utilizes the term "bicultural" to refer to those that, in her words, "must contend with: (1) two cultural systems whose values are very often in direct conflict; and (2) a set of sociopolitical and historical forces dissimilar to those of mainstream Anglo-American students and the educational institutions that bicultural students must attend." (1991, p. xvi)

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Diving with Whales:

Five Reasons for Practitioners to Write for Publication

by

GRACE HALL MCENTEE

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Why should we write for publication about our own practice? At least five reasons exist for writing from the inside about the hard work of changing individual practice and whole schools:

- to reflect upon practice
- to discover who we are and what we think
- to change school culture
- to model for students
- to inform and interact with the public

Teaching practice is part of a complex system within the universe of education. Like change in any organic system, a thoughtful shift in any facet of practice impacts everything else. But how does one get inside teaching practice in order to study it and in order to change it?

Sylvia Earle, internationally renowned marine biologist, recently worked with some of our writers. She told her story of trying to change the "culture" of the way people study the seas. The whale, for example, had been studied only from the surface of the sea. The tail of the whale is its thumbprint, by which scientists know one from the other and track them from place to place. But who would know how they nurture their young, how they look and sound within their own environment and their own culture? With the courage of any explorer of the unknown, Earle dove with the whales.

Writing for publication about practice thrusts the writer through the surface to the deep water of professional practice. Practitioner-writers swim through stages of awareness and discovery from the first moment when they consider the dive. They see students, colleagues, parents, the school in new ways. Writing groups become vehicles for probing more deeply.

My partner Joseph Check, Director of the Boston Writing Project, and I did not know this when we first joined with other practitioners to create a journal where teachers' voices could be heard in the educational arena. Now, nearly ten years later, we have found that practitioner-writers supported over time, from idea to publication, often plumb the depths of their work. Through this medium, they see and understand their own practice in new ways.

Writing for publication about practice is like diving with whales. Traditionally, schools and classroom teaching have been studied from the outside looking in. While this is one valid way of knowing education, it is from other perspectives, closer to the heart of learning, that writing about practice gains its value.

To Reflect upon Practice

The teaching self is not static. Each of us is in a continual state of evolution. Daily experiences, including current reading, writing, viewing, and interaction with others, modify who we are in the classroom. Writing to reflect on practice creates an interior dialogue, an awareness that we do not function in isolation. In addition, we come to know what every historian knows: that the very recording of experiences creates questions and casts perspective on what happened.

Edorah Frazer, a teacher at Souhegan High School in Amherst, New Hampshire, writes about perspective:

> *Every time I write about my work I take it and myself more seriously. In sorting through my experience, I uncover value in my teaching, my collegial relationships, and in my own capacity to make sense of the things I'm involved in. In my head I am extremely self-critical, to the point of frequently doubting my ability to contribute to my learning community, my school. As I write about my work, though, it looks better to me—not, I think, because I write with rose ink, but rather because I ultimately write more objectively than my spontaneous mind thinks. I make up stories and exaggerate all day long in my head. Somehow in writing my heart begins to balance the harshness of my mind and I can get closer to truth. Of course, sometimes I write things that aren't true. But the grace of writing is that it lingers to be looked at again, and I can come back with renewed integrity or fresh perspective and capture what's real.*

When practitioners initially dive into writing about their work, at one level they simply intend to tell their story. A good story is worth sharing. The story might be about an incident from a single class or lesson, a conflict with a student or colleague, a dilemma in implementing new curriculum or assessment. Once the story is told, or within the process of telling the story, however, something happens to the storyteller. The teacher now looks at the story through the lens of a writer who must be clear about both content and process. The writer asks in reflection, "Exactly what is it that I need to say? How will I best convey my story?"

The archetypal writer — let's make her a poet — has always been the seer, the one who is more sensitive to the world around her, who says what needs to be said for others in similar situations. Through writing, the practitioner gains a heightened awareness of professional practice as she intends to share that practice with others. Even as the writer prepares to share experiences and learning through text, however, the dive deepens through the medium. The process of reflecting and choosing language to capture experience provokes new discovery. "When she...begins to perceive the close relationships between language thought and reality in her...transformation, she will see the need for new forms of comprehension and, also, expression" (Freire, 1985, p. 22).

Discovery of Who We Are and What We Think

In order to communicate with each other, with our students, and with parents, teachers need to become clear about who we are and what we think. The complexity of our work often hides like a sea creature at the bottom of the ocean's deepest trenches. Initially, writing about practice seems fairly straight forward, but the process of writing complicates things. Only

when we begin to see below the surface do we discover the complexity of our own practice and the possibilities within it.

A year ago I attempted to write a chapter for an intended book about professional development. I was a teacher on leave of absence working with the professional development team at the Annenberg Institute for School Reform, a national school reform organization at Brown University. My chapter was to be about teachers' changing practice. I had decided to write a personal narrative that included both my voice and the voices of practicing classroom educators.

As soon as I began to write, a seemingly simple question blocked my progress: What is my practice? The question opened unexplored areas which led to more questions. I became stymied in murky waters. The progress of the chapter slowed to a stop.

Some practitioners do break through the complexity of practice to a place of clarity. At that point the act of writing casts a light for discovery. Chris Louth, a teacher at Croton-Harmon, a secondary school in Croton-Harmon, NY, discovered that the process of capturing what she had learned revealed new learning yet to be explored. She writes:

> *Recently I completed an article which was an attempt to sum up several years of work with various colleagues on peer coaching. As always the writing nudged me toward a kind of clarity about what I'd learned from my experiences. To convey to others the importance of something I felt passionately about, I needed to get clear about what I was saying, shed much of the ambiguity inherent in such complex work....The writing helped me to achieve a greater clarity, but as I used that new clarity as a lens to process continuing experience, I realized that conclusions achieved through writing suddenly became just the first step in a new learning.*

Boldly, teachers must now use their stories for a new purpose — school reform. If schools are to change for the better, teachers must use their stories to analyze their best practices and discover their core values. Schools do not change under the pressure of mandated rules and policies. Rather, schools change through a combination of forces from within and without. Changing that culture from within must begin with an awareness of our own stories and how they contribute to the culture of schooling.

To Change the Culture of Schooling

Sharing stories provides insight into individual practice, documents shifts in thinking, and may lead to action. Simon Hole, a fourth-grade teacher at Narragansett Elementary School in Narragansett, RI, illustrates what the experience of writing about practice was like for him:

> *I had been sharing my teaching since I started back in Michigan in 1973, working in teams every year but one, and that had never seemed particularly risky. It always felt natural to work with others. Carolyn, Letty and I have been teaching partners for better than 10 years. During that time we have developed the kind of collegiality Judith Warren Little writes about; planning units and lessons, co-teaching, reflecting on our work. We trust each other enough to talk about all aspects of our practice and often ask each other the hard questions....But this was different. I was asking my partners to read a draft of an article that I was writing, and for the first time in our professional relationship, I was nervous about sharing my ideas with them. Well, not exactly ideas— those we had been sharing for quite some time. And it wasn't just that I was sharing my writing, although as a novice writer, I still find it a bit scary to have others read my pieces...So what was the difference?...For the first time I was attempting to describe several of our co-teaching sessions and had included my own attempt to make some sense of what had happened.*
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> *My dilemma was that while we often talked about our work, there was, in a corner of my mind, a chance that my attempt to write about it for publication would change our relationship...Is it worth taking the chance? ... Apparently it was, as the writing was shared and the learning that resulted from our conversations about that piece have helped us all improve our practice.*

By the time Hole and his team members joined with others to form a Critical Friends' Group at Narragansett Elementary School, they had already gone public with their work through Hole's writing. Without hesitation they stepped forward to model observation and "public" debriefing. His team member Letty Mills said during one of those early debriefings that her

lesson is always better when she is being observed. She said, "It is not because I am better prepared but that I am better focused. A change occurred within myself. It is as though I am two people in my classroom. One is teaching, the other observing through the lens of my focus question." Writing about practice creates that same dual role: the writer is both practitioner and critical observer.

Traditionally, teachers work in isolation. They plan lessons alone, teach alone, feel success alone, and sometimes agonize alone about why a lesson or a class did not produce the learning intended. Coming out of isolation broadens the possibilities for teaching and learning. In a sense, teachers who work together move to a more public arena with their work.

Teachers writing about practice become acutely aware not only of their work with students in the classroom but also of their relationships with other faculty in the school who in a large way create the culture of the school. They become sensitized to the effect that their words may have within the larger context within which they teach. Peggy Silva, a teacher at Sonhegan High School, in Amherst, NH, shares her heightened awareness:

> *As a teacher trying to write from within and about her workplace, I am struggling to be honest, open, fair, protective. I recognize that my words about my work will affect colleagues and change my relationships with them in subtle and not so-subtle ways. The Hippocratic oath challenges the medical community to 'First, do no harm.'*

The tension teacher-writers face is first to define the word 'harm.' Silva and her colleague, Edorah Frazer, wrote a controversial piece about an experience with the evolving career ladder/portfolio system at their school. Silva applied for career advancement through the portfolio process; Frazer sat on the board. Before the process began, the two decided to write about it from their individual perspectives. To preserve the integrity of the process, they agreed not to talk until a decision about Silva's advancement had been rendered by the board. The painful initial denial of Silva's application thrust the two into unexplored personal and professional territory. During the editing of their writing intended for publication, they negotiated with each other, as well as with administrators and faculty, to find grounds for common understanding and progress in this revolutionary and very important project.

Teachers interested in changing school culture may be inspired by the work of Paolo Freire. Freire writes about his educative theory and practice with South American peasants living and working within an oppressive system. In order to assist them in transforming themselves and their culture, he first used stories relevant to them; then he asked them to tell their own stories. Once told, the stories became texts for learning, for analysis and action. The storytellers and their peers learned to question both their own assumptions and actions as well as those of their overseers. Freire calls this a "crack" in the silence of a society. Telling the story is a liberating act. Through this "pedagogy of the oppressed," peasants learned to ask "Why?" and, in so doing, embarked upon the process of transforming both the self and the culture. Teachers and students become co-learners in the process of inquiring into and decoding the stories. Themes for study emerge.

Good stories beg for climactic moments or subtle turning points. According to David Tripp in his book *Critical Incidents and Professional Judgments*, a critical incident is an occurrence in our daily practice that we hold up for examination by isolating an incident, writing about it in detail, analyzing it and exploring its significance. Critical incidents become tools for carefully looking at the quality of professional judgments and at the assumptions underlying those judgments. Through these and other tools, writing groups in schools can begin to explore issues of common concern and may serve as turning points in changing practice.

Both Freire and Tripp advocate using our own stories as text to inquire into ourselves and our culture. Such texts for learning place the teacher in the position of learner. They create a dialectic about what is and what might be. And they create a model for critical thinking and dialogue for our students.

To Model for Students

Deborah Meier, author of *The Power of Their Ideas* and founder of Central Park East Secondary School in East Harlem, NY, is an outspoken proponent of teachers serving as models for students. She writes:

> *I'm always hoping that if teachers write more they will share with their students their particular struggles to get the words down 'just right.' Imagine what a difference it would make if students were exposed to*

dozens of such adults over the course of their school-going lives.

At CPESS Meier created a culture of intellectual discourse as a strategy for running the school and as a model for students. She is vehement in her belief that we cannot teach students to debate issues in an informed manner if we do not model that behavior on a regular basis in faculty lounges and in classrooms.

Craftsmen of old served as professional models for apprentices who observed and asked questions about their craft. Students learned by observation, listening, sometimes copying. After the conclusion of the apprenticeship, novice craftsmen incorporated those learned skills into their own emerging artistic style. Jon Appleby, a teacher at Noble High School in Berwick, ME, not only models for his students but also enjoys their questions about his work. He writes:

I get curious reactions to my writing from colleagues. Articles about education bring brief, "I liked it" kinds of comments. When I gave about thirty poems I wrote this year to a dozen or so teachers, their responses were awkward and surprised, as if the openness of poetry had somehow broken rules of distance in the profession. Only my students seemed able to ask real questions and make some good comments, perhaps because my class is always putting the heart and the head in contexts for sharing.

Veterans model for neophytes in the world of work. Physicians serve as models for interns, judges for clerks, mentor teachers for student teachers and so on. Through the process of writing about practice, teachers retain their vulnerability as learners, sensitive to the complex challenge of putting thoughts into words. Writing is a humble act during which the writer is always up against personal inadequacy. Sharing this struggle with students models genuine learning.

To Inform and Interact with the Public

Writing about practice for an audience is very different from journal writing. It is also very different from writing about someone else's practice or about education at large. The practitioner who writes from personal practice looks inward through a process of reflection upon practice in relation to students, subject matter, colleagues, and sometimes the system within which the work occurs. At some point toward revision for publication, the writer looks outward, sometimes with trepidation, at who the audience might be, within the school or beyond. As a reader, the writer knows that good writing will have impact. Sometimes for the first time, the practitioner-writer realizes that writing about practice is a political statement.

Such narrative explications have the effect of framing the idiosyncratic in a 'lifelike' fashion that can promote negotiation and avoid confrontational disruption and strife ... the conditions by which differences in meaning can be resolved by invoking mitigating circumstances that account for divergent interpretations of 'reality' (Jerome Bruner, *Acts of Meaning* p. 67).

Each of us sees reality from a different perspective. Through writing for publication about practice, practitioner/writers learn to tell a story to a particular audience in a particular way. Personal narrative has powerful potential to link the school to the community.

Through stories about practice we can create an understanding between writer and reader. Most educators, like most members of the general public, were schooled in traditional ways. It is hard to imagine schooling without basal readers and students seated quietly in rows. By writing for publication about changing practice, they can include the public in their own search for improved schooling.

Writing our stories about practice seems, in a very complex way, to be one way to immerse ourselves in our practice, a way to plumb its depths through another medium. On a literal level in *Sea Change*, Sylvia Earle tells her story of trying to change the "culture" of the way people study the seas. She dives with whales.

She writes:

One moment, all I could see was a massive black head, 15-foot-long flippers, a grapefruit-sized eye, then, in a mountainous blur of motion, she swept by, miraculously avoiding contact by inches.

In a sense Earle became a whale. Inside the dramatic moment, she experienced a shift in perspective about her own role in the underwater community.

Throughout her career Earle has been an explorer and caretaker of the sea and vocal advocate of reform. She

dove with whales to understand them and tried to get to the ocean bottom to prove her own ecological theory. To get to the bottom, Earle founded a company to build a deep ocean-diving vehicle.

Writing about practice for publication is one way for practitioners to dive with whales, to sit in a deep ocean diving bell to explore the depths of their own teaching practice. How do we dive with whales and plunge deeper into the canyons of our practice to see it in a way that we have never before seen it? How do we change our practice to protect and nurture the fragile life, the very vitality that supports our organic system? Like Earle's diving bell, peer editing and writing support groups allow writers to dive deeper than they could alone. Writers see the world of teaching practice through new eyes and, with the help of others, discover what may have been hidden in the darkness. Back on the surface, they prepare their stories for an audience of their peers and for a wider readership.

All practitioners benefit from writing about practice. Whatever the level of expertise or experience with the written word, those who dare to write for an audience see their own practice through their new critical eyes. Sharing both during the revision process and in the eventual published piece provokes change in individual practice to meet newly recognized challenges.

> *So, how, finally, can we help steer the course of events…? One solution is simply to improve one's own self, and work toward a better society within existing institutions.* (Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *The Evolving Self*, p. 280).

Writing about practice for publication is a medium for understanding individual practice from the inside. When we join with others in the diving bell of that inquiry process, we may discover what has been hidden in the darkness and what may be crucial to new life in our collective classrooms.

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Let's Take Another Look At the Fish:

The Writing Process as Discovery

by

Bob Tierney

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Probably every science teacher has heard the tale of Louis Agassiz and the fish, but few have heeded its significance. It's a meaningful message, applicable for teachers across the curriculum.

Louis Agassiz was a Swiss-American, 19th-century naturalist who proved there was once an Ice Age. Although famous for his work regarding glaciers, he was invited to the United States based upon his writings about fossil fish. He spent the last part of the century as a professor at Harvard; the Museum of Comparative Zoology at Harvard is named for him.

One of his students wrote an essay, "A Pencil is One of the Best Eyes" (In Sparke & McKowen, 1970), about learning under the famous professor. Agassiz began one lesson by asking the student what he wanted to learn and how he intended to use the knowledge afterwards. He then told the student to carefully remove a preserved fish from a jar and observe it. "I will ask you later what you have learned," Professor Agassiz told the student.

The student gazed at the preserved fish. In ten minutes, the student had seen all that he thought might be seen of the fish. He looked, in vain, for his professor. Not finding him, he was forced to spend another half-hour looking at the loathsome pickled fish. He then went to lunch. When he returned the fish was still in the pan, and the professor could not be found. Bored and thoroughly sick of the smelly fish, the student pulled out a pencil and began to draw the fish. He discovered several new features of the fish. Finally, the professor returned. The student showed Professor Agassiz the drawings.

"That is right," Professor Agassiz said. "A pencil is one of the best eyes. Well, what is it like?"

Professor Agassiz listened attentively to the student's explanation of what he had learned, but to the student's dismay he said, "You have not looked very carefully, Why? You have not even seen one of the most conspicuous features of the animal, which is as plainly before your eyes as the fish itself; look again, look again!"

Resentfully, the student observed the fish again, but went about the task with a renewed vigor. He discovered one thing after another, realizing how just the professor's criticism was.

"Do you see it yet?" the professor asked.

"No," replied the student. "I am certain I do not, but I see how little I saw before."

"That is the next best," Professor Agassiz answered. "I will not listen to you now; put away the fish and go home; perhaps you will be ready with a better response in the morning. I will examine you before you look at the fish again."

So the student left the classroom without his notes or the specimen, but required to search for the most visible feature the professor alluded to. He strolled along the banks of the Charles River, his mind focused on the fish and what he would explain to the professor. The next morning, the professor greeted him cordially and seemed as anxious as the student that learning had taken place.

"Do you perhaps mean," the student asked, "that the fish has symmetrical sides with paired organs?"

"Of course, of course," replied the professor, obviously pleased, and he proceeded to talk for several minutes about the importance of what was discovered.

The student then asked, "What should I do next?"

"Oh, look at the fish!" Professor Agassiz said, and left the room.

An hour later Professor Agassiz returned and listened eagerly to any new discoveries the student made. "That is good, that is good!" Professor Agassiz repeated as the student explained, "but that is not all; go on, look at the fish." For three days the student was forced to look at the fish without the use any artificial aid. "Look, look, look," admonished Professor Agassiz when the student asked questions.

On the fourth day, Professor Agassiz brought in a second fish of the same family and placed it alongside the first. The student was asked to point out the differences and similarities between the two. Another fish, and another were laid out until the entire family was before the student and the student understood the relationships between the fish.

"Facts are stupid things," Professor Agassiz said, "until brought into connection with some general law."

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This story haunted me during most of my early career as a science teacher, resulting in a sense of guilt about my own teaching efforts. I realized I was a presenter of facts, wondering why the students never seemed to understand the concepts. I tested for knowledge of facts, knowledge the students retained just long enough to pass the multiple-choice examinations. It was education by checklist.

I had been a presenter of information when I needed to be a facilitator of learning. I had lots of facts, and if I ran out, I could always look up more. Later in my teaching career, after my exposure to the writing project, I realized the writing process is a discovery technique that can get students personally and emotionally involved, a way of getting them to look once again at the fish. It is a means of accomplishing what Louis Agassiz had succeeded in doing with his students. I began devising writing assignments designed not so much to inform, but to help students understand. I wanted my teaching to be more like Agassiz's and less like the questions at the end of the chapter.

On one occasion, my students entered to find a leaf had been placed on each desk. "I want each of you to observe your leaf," I said. "But I want you to conduct this observation following my instructions."

I asked them to divide a piece of paper into four quadrants and number them one through four. "Now in square one, write a description of the leaf." When they read aloud their descriptions I was encouraged by the variety of their perspectives.

Some focused on the facts before their eyes: "The leaf is green." "The leaf has veins."

Some put other senses to work: "The leaf smells like camphor."

One relied on a basic tool of science, the ruler: "My leaf is two and a half inches long."

Another student made a comparison: "It looks like the teeth of a saw."

I next asked students to use square two to finish the following sentence: "This leaf is like _____ because...." They decided that the leaf was:

a road map because the veins appear to be highways;

a canoe because of its shape and the fact that it floats;

the dress I bought for the prom because it is shiny green on the outside and dull green on the inside.

After writing these metaphors on the board, I asked, "Which of these represents the most far-out way of thinking about a leaf?"

The students were now at the center of the discussion, and I, like Agassiz, was taking a risk, unsure of what the students would come up with.

I remember on another occasion asking a writing project group at UC Berkeley to create a leaf meta-

phor. The leaf, observed one writer, is like a "bedraggled, just neutered dog: torn, wet, with a surface full of mold." We had a lot of fun with that one.

Back in the classroom, I asked students what it would be like to be whatever it was they chose as the most far out metaphor. They were to imagine that life in quadrant three. As a group we agreed that the prom-dress metaphor was pretty far out. Here are some of the ways students brought the dress to life. The leaf connection was not lost on the students.

By the end of the dance I am bathed in sweat.

When the girl moves, I move.

I am making the girl more attractive, more noticed.

When I am exposed in just the right combination of light and shadow my texture and color can be extraordinarily beautiful.

Finally, I asked the students to use the fourth quadrant to again comment on the leaf. All along they had listened to each other. This sharing was reflected in their responses. Now, also, they were asking questions about their observations.

Why is one side of the leaf darker than the other side?

How does the leaf breathe?

Does a leaf, like a prom dress, need to be cleaned? Is God the great leaf cleaner?

I then ask the students to write one sentence about something they believe to be true about the leaf, thus beginning a search for the truth which will become the motto of the class. Then comes the inevitable question: What do we mean by true? We define truth as something that cannot be argued with. Sentences are scrutinized to see if they can be disputed and, if so, they are rewritten so that they are irrefutable.

For example, a student might write, "Leaves are green." After a discussion the sentence might be altered to read, "Most leaves are green, but some can be red, yellow, or purple." A biology student might write, "The stomata controls the amount of air entering the leaf." After discussion, often a lively one, the sentence might be revised to read, "The opening of the stomata, under osmotic pressure, can regulate the amount of carbon dioxide the leaf gets." The students learn to differentiate between fact and assumption. This exercise pushes students toward specific thinking. Students will not write in a more specific way until they learn to think in more specific ways.

This exercise generates lots of questions about the object. Why do leaves turn color? Why isn't the underside glossy like the top? Are the veins of the leaf like the veins in our body? I build my upcoming lecture around these questions, giving the students some of the ownership of the presentation. If they accept ownership, they must also accept the responsibility for learning, just as Louis Agassiz put that responsibility on his student. Agassiz didn't give the student facts. He facilitated the student's understanding.

Students had been forced to think about the leaf, looking at it from different perspectives. I was showing, not telling students more complicated ways of writing about the leaf.

Since this first adaptation of Agassiz, I have varied and expanded this activity, using a variety of objects, sometimes even fish.

I try to emulate Agassiz in other ways. Agassiz placed other fish alongside the fish his student was observing. Applying the Agassiz aphorism, "A pencil is sometimes the best eye," I frequently start a unit about the human eye by having students draw each others' eyes. Forced to observe closely, students notice similarities and differences that help them draw conclusions just as Agassiz's student did when asked to compare fish.

Just as Agassiz had his student think about the fish without his notes or the specimen, I often have my students do what I call a Neuron Note. The name is biological, it is jazzy, and it implies thinking. The students go home without their books or notes and write a summary of what they think they understand. I stress to the students that it is all right if they do not understand, but they need to realize they don't understand. Just as Agassiz's student said, "I see how little I saw before," the Neuron Notes help students identify what they do not yet understand. I give students full credit if they write their Neuron Note, none if they don't. The following is typical of a Neuron Note by a general science student trying to express his comprehension of osmosis:

Osmosis is to do with water and cells. Osmosis is the absorbing of water by cells, or pass through. I don't know what it does exactly once it's inside. Osmosis is not the only way, but the one that is used the most is diffusion. I would like to know where they got a name like osmosis for it? Osmosis is different than any other form, but still gets the job done. When it occurs water actually passes through a somewhat membrane so as to equalize the amount on both sides of the cell or whatever kind of membrane it is.

The lesson provides an insight as to what the students really understand. I can determine if they are really ready for a test. In the old days I decided the test date months ahead, usually on a Friday, and gave the test regardless if the students were ready. I also complained, along with my colleagues, about how many students did not study.

In responding to the Neuron Notes, I try to emulate the one-on-one relationships Agassiz had with his student in the fish story. My students, at the beginning of the school year, provide me with a blank audiotape. I believe that the best response to student writing is the oral response, not the written reply. I put the tapes into bags, by period, and when they turn in a Neuron Note, I reach into a bag, find the tape, and then find the student's paper. As I read the paper, I talk to the student. I am able to coach each student, one on one, for the upcoming test. I congratulate the students on what they understand. I do not provide answers. Like Louis Agassiz, I ask questions that allow the student the exhilaration of their own discovery.

I later came to know some things about short-term and long-term memory and realized Louis Agassiz's teaching technique succeeded in imprinting his student's understanding into the long-term memory. Those early lessons of mine only ended up in the short-term memory of a student. Using the analogy of the computer, these lessons might have made it into their RAM, random access memory, but they were not getting into their hard drive. One way to place concepts of a lesson into the long-term memory of a student is to have the student associate the lesson with what she already knows. Another is to get the student emotionally involved. These writing exercises use both of these methods.

Some teachers, pressured to prepare students for tests that rely heavily on factual regurgitation, are struggling for a way for their students to assemble facts into a comprehensible concept. When I ask myself how Louis Agassiz might meet this contemporary challenge, I can almost hear his ghost whispering in my ear, "Look, look, look again at the fish."

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Book Reviews

You Can Make a Difference:

A Teacher's Guide to Political Action

by Barbara Keresty, Susan O'Leary, and Dale Wortley

Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1998.

$14.00; 110 pages

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Reviewed by Elyse Eidman-Aadahl

Elyse Aidman-Aadahl is co-director of the National Writing Project.

The 1998 election featured a record number of candidates running on "education platforms." Sections of these platforms included prescriptions for curriculum, for the content of professional development programs, as well as plans to test both students and teachers. We are entering an era in which legislators, businessmen, and community groups are interested in governing not only the financing of public education, but also the process and substance of education, traditionally the domains of professional educators. These are tough times for classroom teachers. Are we surprised that so many teachers and parents are eager to get into the political process?

A new book from Heinemann responds to the sense of urgency that many educators and parents feel to fight for the programs and practices they believe in. The book grows out of the on-the-ground experiences of the three authors, who have created a primer for teachers and parents considering action in their own districts. This is a book intended "to help (readers) learn quickly what to do, how to be effective as (they) become involved politically, and how to maintain some balance as battles intensify." (xxi)

You Can Make a Difference is a slim volume offering clear and practical advice for organizing our colleagues and community members around local policy issues. Suitable for use by parents and older students as well as teachers, the book leads readers through common-sense strategies for initiating new programs, maintaining district support, and organizing for the tough fights. Drawing on their own experience as advocates for Reading Recovery, the authors provide sound, basic advice for local political action where coalition building and media savvy are as important as protocols for addressing the Board of Education. The book is specific and detailed, including sample meeting agendas, board handouts, and press releases from their own campaign.

Ultimately, Keresty, O'Leary, and Wortley hope that readers go beyond a pragmatic, single campaign view of advocacy for education. Their final chapter, "How to Think Politically," surveys lessons learned from figures like Ghandi, Martin Luther King, Saul Alinsky, Thomas Jefferson, and Thich Nat Hanh. No, they are not urging readers to sacrifice family and job for full-time political action, but they do mine lessons for leadership in the public sphere.

Throughout, their commitment is to the possibilities of democracy and to the fullest definition of citizenship. In making their case, they quote Jefferson and draw examples from the life of Vaclav Havel in the belief that these figures provide models of a civic life for the teacher who orchestrates a school board presentation and for the parent who speaks passionately at a board meeting.

In the Middle:
New Understanding about Writing, Reading and Learning

by NANCIE ATWELL

Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 1998
$32.50; 546 pages

◆

Reviewed by CHRIS STREET

Chris Street is a teacher consultant with the Central Texas Writing Project.

The long-awaited second edition of Atwell's immensely popular and influential book (the first edition was published in 1987) again shows Atwell's reflection on her experiences as a middle-school teacher and writer. The book reads like a story but informs like a textbook. The narrative sense of the book draws readers in while the practical suggestions and concrete examples enable readers to share Atwell's vision.

In the Middle focuses on the workshop format for the teaching of reading and writing, two subjects that Atwell claims cannot be separated. Atwell's workshop is "student-centered in the sense that individuals' rigorous pursuit of their ideas is the primary content of the course" (p. 71). Atwell's curriculum evolves with the aid of her students as she probes her students with questions that matter: "What do you care about? What do you know? What do you know that others don't" (p. 14)? The answers to these questions point students toward real writing situations, real opportunities for individualized learning, and real reasons for writers to attend to their meanings. Atwell provides the structure needed by adolescent learners while honoring them as their "mentor of writing, a mediator of writing strategies, and a model of a writer at work" (p. 21).

The first of the three sections of the book, appropriately called "Always Beginning," is a narrative, tracing Atwell's journey as a reader, writer, and teacher, always learning from her students. It is her students' experiences that inform the next section of the book.

The second section of the book—"Writing and Reading Workshop"—begins with a quote by Henry David Thoreau: "It is not enough to be busy; the question is, what are we busy about?" Atwell's students are in the processes of learning things that matter to them. Atwell models writing on subjects that are important to her. In these "territories," as she calls them, Atwell writes about topics as diverse as her dog, chocolate, motherhood, and dreams. These examples prompt her students to examine their own interests and desires as they name their own "territories." We witness how skillfully Atwell weaves the concerns of everyday life with her curriculum.

One of the pleasures of reading Atwell is her thoroughness. All of the elements needed to establish a workshop are here, complete with suggested times and order of activities. Built into this structured workshop setting is time for important teaching—something Atwell accomplishes through her use of mini lessons. The mini lessons come not from an outdated text or rhetorical grammar book but from Atwell's "analysis of what students need to know next, based on what's happening in their writing and reading, and from [her] experience of the kinds of information needed by this age group" (p. 151). For example, if her students need a refresher covering the power of using precise, active verbs, Atwell shows them how in a short, directed mini-lesson.

Atwell's approach to student reports on books that they read is a fine example of her overall emphasis on engaging students in the meaningful work of real writers:

> *The book report is a school genre contrived for school purposes: make kids read, make them prove they read, make them practice a*

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prescribed format. No one writes book reports except students in school; no one reads them except teachers. But the book review, a genre that exists in the real world, invites students to discover their passions—and their prejudices—as readers and to teach others what they find in a book so engagingly that others will want to look for it, too. (p. 470)

At the heart of differences between book reports and book reviews is Atwell's belief that "when students believe that what they have to say is important, both within their lives and beyond them, they care about how their words go down on the page" (p. 250).

Perhaps one of the greatest strengths of the book is the Appendixes section. The 17 appendices in this 44-page section list resources, materials, and places to publish; there are appendices for survey forms, record keeping documents, and writing quotes. After reading the book, teachers can turn to the final section of the book and find the materials needed to start their own journeys as workshop teachers.

Atwell is always challenging her students to do a little more, to go a little further. *In The Middle* challenges its readers to do the same while providing them with the tested plans they will need as they move ahead and explore the potential of workshop teaching.

The Rise and Fall of English

by Robert Scholes

New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998.

$20.00; 192 pages

◆

Reviewed by Pat Fox

Pat Fox is director on leave from the Coastal Georgia Writing Project.

The son of first generation Irish and Italian Roman Catholic parents, Brown University professor Robert Scholes followed their dream for him to Yale University, "that bastion of Capitalism and Protestantism," where, as a student in the 1940s, he experienced a religious conversion: "I was thoroughly indoctrinated into the religion of literature. That is, I came to believe, with others of my generation, that reading literature and criticizing it were the best things a human being could do with life. . . ."

The Rise and Fall of English is at heart Scholes' confession of a loss of faith in the religion of literature and in what he sees as a "system of assumptions about teaching that are so out of touch with our real situation as to be both ludicrous and dangerous." Asserting that "academic fields are not permanent" and that English "has not always been taught and studied in the forms we are accustomed to and sometimes believe to be eternal," Scholes explains that the central place of an English literary canon as we know it is a relatively recent development in the history of English studies—having replaced the study of Latin and Greek texts on the one hand and classical rhetoric and oratory on the other only at the turn of the twentieth century. What's more, he notes, the belief in the value of an English literary canon was based upon cultural assumptions that are now outdated; to wit, that such texts are "the scripture of modern civilization" and that, as such, they continue to be intellectually and spiritually at the center of the lives of those who study them.

Extending the project he began a dozen years ago in Textual Power, Scholes poses the question "How can English studies help students become fit for life in a world like ours?" and argues that the time has come again for us to reconceive English as a discipline focused, not narrowly upon the critique of an exclusive literary canon, but broadly upon the thoughtful production and critical consumption of texts. Asserting that "English teachers from kindergarten to graduate school [are] engaged in the same process of helping students learn how to understand texts more fully and

to express themselves more eloquently," Scholes urges us "to reconstruct our efforts as students and teachers" around the study of texts. "Under this sign," he maintains, "there is no difference between the theory of composition and the theory of literature ... and this theory itself rests upon the shared stance of students and teachers as practitioners of reading and writing textuality."

The word text, Scholes explains, comes from the Latin words texere, which means to weave, and textum, "that which is woven." He goes on to urge that we consider the idea of text broadly to include electronic and visual as well as print texts and explains further that "text refers to the fabric of culture itself, in which we and our students find ourselves already woven." Seeing as central to our jobs that we "try to learn and teach how to weave or reweave those garments," Scholes explains, "What I am suggesting is that we stop thinking of ourselves as if we had a subject matter and start thinking of ourselves as having a discipline which we can offer our students as part of the cultural equipment that they are going to need when they leave us."

Exchanging Lives:

Middle School Writers Online

by SCOTT CHRISTIAN

Urbana, Illinois: NCTE, 1997.

$15.95; 147 pages

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Reviewed by LACINDA FILES

Lacinda Files is a teacher consultant with the Northwest Arkansas Writing Project at the University of Arkansas and is the Gifted and Talented Facilitator for Smith Elementary and Helen Tyson Middle School in Springdale, AR.

How does a teacher inspire students to reveal their deepest emotions, their most honest thoughts, their most authentic unvarnished character? It sounds like an unattainable fantasy (especially if we are talking about 8th graders), but Scott Christian was able to do just that as he demonstrates in his new book, *Exchanging Lives: Middle School Writers Online*.

Christian's book beckons us to witness an intense online experiment created by The Bread Loaf Rural Teachers Network (BLRTN), a teacher support system which has as its goal to counter the well-known deficiencies of rural schools in technology and funding .

Once BLRTN teachers began to dialogue "online" using the newly-formed BreadNet, the idea for creating an online student literary conference emerged. This was an innovation enthusiastically supported by the BreadNet correspondents. Within a short time, schools in Alaska, Mississippi, Vermont and New Mexico had developed a plan which allowed students to engage in electronic responses to the novel: *Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl*. This work was chosen because the teachers were familiar with it, because it challenges 8th graders and because it contains issues which are pertinent to today's adolescents.

On an agreed upon day, each of the five classrooms involved began reading the novel. The schools took turns posting three questions related to the text. These questions usually grew out of classroom discussions. Christian points out, "When kids are trying so desperately to figure out

who they are, questions that allow them to explore their own perceptions, opinions, and experiences are most effective" (p. 39).

One message which comes through in this book is the amount of time and dedication given by the teachers in order to make the Anne Frank Conference (AFC) successful. Each of them worked with a limited number of computers which meant that someone, usually the teacher, had to type in the responses of the students. Once the responses were received, they were copied off and either given to the individual students to whom they were addressed, or discussed as a class using the overhead projector. The process was laborious and tedious, but the results seem to have been worth it.

After three years of the AFC, with some 800 students having participated, Christian enrolled in a class at Bread Loaf called "Writing for Publication." He decided to take on the task of unraveling over 120 pages of transcript from the conferences, analyzing the writing to see what patterns emerged and how the writing generated from the conference differed from writing normally produced when students read this novel. Christian observed differences in voice, tone, flavor and content when students responded to the online questions. The typical non-conference responses to the book were most often focused on the questions at hand with little or no elaboration, personal information or personal opinions. The online response, on the other hand, was characterized by a diversity of topics and variety of issues discussed. The responses were models of individual expression packed with personal voice and real concerns. This was the type of writing he and the other teachers had longed for 8th graders to produce!

The responses were models of individual expression packed with personal voice and real concerns. This was the type of writing Christian and the other teachers had longed for 8th graders to produce!

The bulk of the book is dedicated to examples of this writing. Students opened up and shared personal information with perfect strangers. This phenomenon is not the norm for 8th graders who, as Christian points out, are mostly suspicious of intrusions upon their "little worlds." The structure of their enclosed school society is usually paramount to all else. But students involved in the Anne Frank Conference became not only more open but also more skilled as writers. Christian sees marked improvement in many reluctant writers, and observes students taking risks with word choices and metaphors. He also finds students quoting from the text and making personal comparisons between Anne and themselves. All of this was done more skillfully and enthusiastically than was the case in Christian's pre-conference classes.

The student writing is a joy to read. It is refreshing to find that students can connect with an audience in clear, resounding personal voices, openly discussing such issues as prejudice, equal rights, parental relationships and fundamental rights of all citizens of a nation.

Read Scott Christian's book to learn about the many uses of modern telecommunications, to be inspired to help develop an online conference in your area and to be encouraged and reminded that middle school students have minds of their own and will use them if given the right opportunity.

NWP: 25 Years of Excellent Readings

BAWP Then ...

by James Gray and Mary K. Healy

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This year, as the National Writing Project celebrates its 25th anniversary, we wondered how the concerns of writing teachers have changed over this quarter century. We decided that one way to focus this question would be to take a look at what Fellows of the Invitational Summer Institutes were reading 25 years ago, and compare and contrast these titles with what they are reading now. We asked Jim Gray and Mary-K. Healy to recall important readings from the early years of the Bay Area Writing Project, and current BAWP director Carol Tateishi to comment on what BAWP Fellows are reading today. Then Don Gallehr, whose tenure at the Northern Virginia Writing Project began in the 1970s and extends to the present, reflects on readings then and now.

When the Bay Area Writing Project opened its doors in the mid-1970s, a number of books and articles on writing and the teaching of writing were already in print. It was not the flood we have today, but many of these works were brilliant and remain so to this day. Here is a sampling of the material Fellows at our early institutes read in whole or in part:

Sylvia Ashton-Warner: *Teacher* (1963). This is a classic book by an instinctive teacher who taught Maori children in a country school in New Zealand for 24 years.

Douglass Barnes, James Britton, Harold Rosen: *Language, the Learner and the School* (1969). This examination of teacher and pupils' classroom language offers valuable insights into the crucial role of language in learning.

Also by Douglass Barnes, *From Communication to Curriculum* (1975). Barnes' studies of pupils' talk and small-group interaction in British classroooms provided the foundation for the development of writing response groups.

James Britton: *Language and learning* (1970). *The Development of Writing Abilities (11-18)* (1975). Britton was the leading light of several major British teachers and scholars who had an early and major impact on our understanding of writing.

Francis Christensen: *Notes toward a new rhetoric: 6 essays for teachers* (1967) These essays describe basic patterns of sentence modification and paragraphs common to 20th century writers, but not touched on in any of the current—and past—grammar and composition textbooks. This is the one piece of research above all others that had a major impact on Jim's teaching of writing.

Paul Diederich: "Measuring Growth in English" (1974). This work taught us about holistic evaluation, an approach Diederich developed to save ETS when they took on the task of a national assessment of writing and found themselves totally befuddled when the readers, doing the only thing they knew how to do, tried to score all those papers one at a time.

Janet Emig: "The Composing Process of Twelfth Graders" (1971). This is the first non-quantative research study involving case studies of real students in and out of the classroom. The 12th-grade students who were the subjects for Emig's case studies did not learn to write in school but at home where they wrote what they wanted to write.

W. Haggitt: *Working with language* (1967). A highly creative teacher's experiments in teaching a very average group of junior high school students in a Council School in Birmingham, England.

David Holbrook: *English for the Rejected*. Published in the 1960s, this fine book was written by another of that strong group of British scholars interested in children's writing. This is the first book about writing we had seen that reproduced children's writing exactly as written.

William Labov: *The Study of Nonstandard English (1970)*. This award-winning book based on Labov's research in the slums and ghettos of New York is a classic in the field.

Ken Macrorie: *Uptaught (1970)*. The most lively, engaging, and readable book on writing we have ever read, the book that describes how Ken Macrorie, after 16 years of teaching writing, discovered how to get his students to write 'fresh' rather than 'dead.' The first of an unending stream of great books on writing, *Telling Writing*, *I-Search*, etc. written by Macrorie.

Nancy Martin et al: *Writing and Learning across the Curriculum* (1976). Based on research in classrooms across England, this book demonstrates how writing can be a powerful tool for learning all school subjects.

James Moffett: James Moffett's unpublished "Writing Assignments" later expanded as *Active Voice*. Twenty-nine writing assignments on a developmental schema that progressed from the most personal, "A Spontaneous Stream of Thoughts" to the most abstract, "Combining of Generalizations into a Theory," a work that sharpened teacher awareness to have students explore a wide range of writing experiences.

Mina Shaughnessy: *Errors and Expectations: A Guide for the Teacher of Basic Writing*. This book is still an inspiring guide for teachers who work with 'basic' writers, written by a woman out the Dakotas who took on the task of teaching the 'basic' writers who appeared in CUNY classes after the university's change in entrance requirements from selective admission to open admission. This important book identifies the errors basic writers make, discusses the reason for the errors, and offers informed strategies for dealing with them. Includes many before and after samplings of writing.

During BAWP's first summer institute we reproduced and handed out so many items that Dick Shoemaker reported that we had given everybody 11 inches and 8 pounds of paper.

... and Now

by Carol Tateishi

◆

For what might seem a surprising reason, we no longer require BAWP summer institute fellows to read the seminal works on Jim Gray's Institute reading list of twenty-five years ago. The reason is the teachers we invite to our summer institute have already absorbed and demonstrated in their practice the principles advocated in these works. While they may not have read, for example, James Britton or Nancy Sommers, they are familiar with the ideas of these writers and have implemented many of their ideas.

However, we *do* think it is important that our summer Fellows know where their best practices have come from, so we include among our common readings two articles by Marcia Renee Goodman: "Teaching writing and thinking," found in the Spring 1989 volume of *Visions and Revisions: Research for Writing Teachers*, published by the Regents of the Universtiy of California; and "Inside the writing process classrooms of Elbow, Murray, and Berthoff," found in the Fall 1988 volume of *Visions and Revisions*. Goodman does an excellent job of summarizing the contributions of the major figures in writing research.

Anyone who wishes to read the original sources may find these works in our resource center.

In developing our current list, we ask, "What are the issues and concerns that our summer Fellows bring to the institute? What works can we introduce that will promote productive talk and thinking among Fellows around their shared interests?" We have developed a list of over thirty citations which answer the needs of our summer Fellows.

There are some common readings we use regularly. Many summer Fellows teach in urban settings, and almost all have classrooms that are linguistically diverse. While these teachers bring to their work a familiarity with process writing and "best practice," they are noticing that the mere implementation of these strategies is not a guarantee that their students' writing will improve. Many Fellows come to the institute willing to question their assumptions and the assumptions of the writing establishment about the most effective way to teach writing.

Two works that express the often unspoken doubts that summer Fellows bring with them are Lisa Delpit's articles, "Skills and Other Dilemmas of a Progressive Black Educator" (Harvard Educational Review, November, 1986) and "The Silenced Dialogue: Power and Pedagogy in Educating Other People's Children" (Harvard Educational Review, August, 1988.) Though these works are over a decade old, the provocative questions Delpit asks about the practice of teaching writing as it relates to culture— particularly the culture of African Americans—always generate important and useful discussion.

Then we add to the mix an article by Maria de la Luz Reyes, "Challenging Venerable Assumptions: Literacy Instruction for Linguisitcally Different Students" (Harvard Educational Review, Winter 1992.) In this article, de la Luz Reyes puts Delpit's questions into the context of second language learners. She sets out and critiques the assumptions of the writing process approach, suggesting departures and revisions that will help process writing work with "linguistically different" learners.

Another concern of many of our Fellows stems from the pressure they feel to teach the expository essay. To some, that means "We can't do personal writing anymore." Others ask, "How can students meet the demands of the essay form without giving up their claim to the personal voice that individualizes and energizes their writing?" To help Fellows work out an answer to this question, we ask them to read two essays by James Moffett, "On Essaying," (Coming on Center, 1981) and "Bridges: From Personal Writing to the Formal Essay" (Center for the Study of Writing Technical Report, March 1989). In these pieces Moffett argues that personal writing and exposition need not be mutually exclusive categories, that much writing that meets the goal of exposition—to explain and convince—relies on the personal. Moffett's essays are particularly powerful because they mix the personal and the formal in a way that illustrates the point he is making.

Readers may note that none of the works I have referred to here is particularly recent. We look for strong ideas where we can find them, but we also try to stay current. For instance, this past summer we made use of Jabari Mahiri's "Street Scripts: African American Youth Writing About Crime and Violence" (Social Justice, Volume 224, No 4). Mahiri builds on the work of Janet Emig who established that many students who demonstrate little competence with school writing are in fact very competent real world writers. He looks at the voluntary writing of African American students, examining its structures and genres. Jabari's work urges teachers to look beyond school assignment writing to better assess the true competencies of their African American students as writers.

Looking over Jim Gray's reading list of twenty-five years ago, I would conclude that we now find it necessary to provide readings that look more carefully at the communities from which our students come. This means that we consider some works that are not limited to or even focused on the teaching of writing. But Jim's common readings and ours do share a goal: to generate among our summer Fellows informed discussion that may lead them to examine and sometimes alter their practice.

... NVWP Then and Now

by

DON GALLEHR

◆

In 1978, the book list for the Northern Virginia Writing Project summer institute consisted of six titles: *Errors and Expectations; The Development of Writing Abilities, 11-18; The Composing Processes of Twelfth Graders; Notes Toward a New Rhetoric; Uptaught*; and Frank O'Hare's *Sentence Combining*. That first summer we had two outside consultants, Janet Emig and Donald Murray. It goes without saying that I was embarrassed that I had not ordered Murray's *A Writer Teaches Writing*. I added it to our fall inservice book list that year.

Our initial list is revealing. Britton, Emig, Shaughnessy, Macrorie, O'Hare, and Christensen are towering figures in our field, and over the years they were joined by Murray, Graves, Atwell, Fulwiler, Moffett, and many others. I liked it then, and I like it now, that we have major works from people who think large.

Our book list now contains 44 works that we stock regularly in the George Mason University book store, with an additional 28 that we recommend. What has changed? For one, the field has fleshed out. For instance, a teacher interested in helping students and parents to bring writing into the home can refer to Peter Stillman's *Families Writing*. A second change is that teachers can read works by fellow teachers. Teachers interested in portfolio assessment, for example, can read *Process and Portfolios in Writing Instruction*, a collection of essays on portfolio assessment written by school and university classroom teachers. A third change is that increased writing by elementary and secondary students has made student writers fluent, and so we have less need for texts on such things as sentence combining.

Countless teachers attending our summer institutes and conferences have heard, met, listened to, and worked with authors of these texts, as well as published writers of fiction, nonfiction, poetry, and drama. This familiarity has led teachers to read more of their favorite authors. It is not unusual for some teachers to have read all of Murray, or Atwell, or Graves.

The project has bridged the gap between classroom teacher and published author in our field from the other direction as well—by developing teachers into writers of articles and books. Some of our earliest teacher consultants have been responsible for original work in areas such as teacher-research, writing across the curriculum, and portfolio assessment. Their articles and books are on our list. Twenty years later we encourage our teachers in the same way—to revise their handouts into articles, and to develop their articles into books. Boynton/Cook, Heinemann, NCTE, NWP and others have published these beginning authors and the work of these writers is now represented in professional libraries across the country.

Several things have remained constant: the quality of the writing of professional works in our field has always been outstanding. Have we ever had to prod teachers to read works by Murray or Graves, Mohr or Tsujimoto? And books read in the summer institute, as good as they are, still play only a supporting role to the demonstration lessons of the Fellows.

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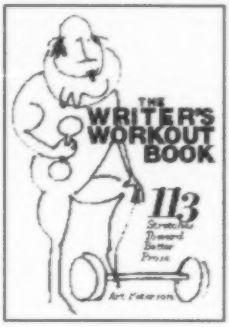

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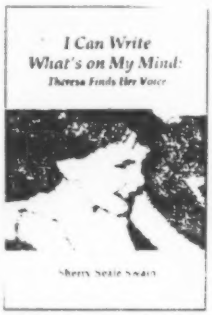
I Can Write What's on My Mind

Theresa Finds Her Voice

SHERRY SEALE SWAIN



Sherry Seale Swain's classroom journal immerses readers in the day-to-day life of this outstanding first grade teacher's classroom where youngsters work together to transform themselves into readers and writers. *I Can Write What's on My Mind* allows us to learn by watching a great teacher at work.

Published by NWP / Paperbound / 112 pages / ($10.50/$8.40 for Associates) / ISBN 1-883920-09-4

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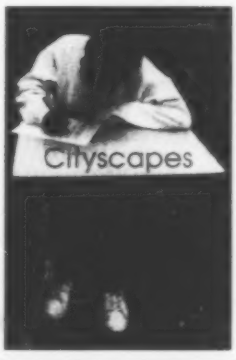
NATIONAL WRITING PROJECT URBAN SITES NETWORK



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— The Editors

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